

Nina Brown Baker

THE
Cinderella
SECRET

A Mystery Story for Girls



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THE CINDERELLA SECRET

By

NINA BROWN BAKER

THE SECRET OF HALLAM HOUSE

THE CHINESE RIDDLE

THE RANEE'S RUBY

THE CINDERELLA SECRET

The
CINDERELLA SECRET

By
NINA BROWN BAKER



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For
NELL AND BETTY JANE

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THE CINDERELLA SECRET

CHAPTER I

MARY JANE

“YOU mean you *really* don’t think she’s stuck up? But, Sis, all the girls at school think so! She lives in the grandest house in town, and wears velvets and chiffons to school, and always acts as though she doesn’t want to talk to anybody! What else could you call it? I think that Mary Jane Smith is—”

“Sh, Francie, not so loud!”

New friends were always surprised to learn that Kathleen and Frances Forrester were sisters. Frances, just twelve, was very fair. Pale gold curls framed a vivid little face, lighted by dancing gray eyes. She could never sit still for very long, and was constantly finding everything about her “romantic” and “thrilling.”

Kathleen, two years older, was gray-eyed too, but there the likeness ended. Kathleen’s eyes were deep set and serene; her dark hair was drawn smoothly back from a face of quiet loveliness. Kathie, as her friends called her, was not easily excited; she was one of those people who always know exactly what to do in every situation.

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Different as they were, the two sisters were very congenial, and spent most of their time together.

The school term had recently ended, and the girls were enjoying a long, lazy vacation. On this particular afternoon, they were sitting in the cool shade of the high stone wall which separated the Forrester lawn from that of the house next door. Over their knitting Kathleen and Frances were chatting about the strange girl who lived there.

The Mortimer mansion towered high over the Forresters' bungalow. It was a raw new building in Spanish style, of violent pink stucco, quite different from the modest homes about it. It was not the only house of its type in the village, however. The nearby city was growing so rapidly that Medhurst, from a sleepy country town, was turning into a prosperous suburb with more and more new residents.

Mr. J. Sterling Mortimer, the Forresters' neighbor, was almost a complete stranger to his neighbors. He maintained an office in the city, to which he went daily, but neither he nor his wife had ever taken any part in the community life during the year they had lived in Medhurst. When Mrs. Mortimer occasionally entertained at an afternoon bridge party for ladies, her guests were always from the city. Elaborately dressed,

they drove through the streets with a very aloof air.

Mrs. Forrester, following the pleasant country custom, had once called on Mrs. Mortimer, only to be told by a maid that her mistress was "not receiving this afternoon." Thus repulsed, the Forresters had carefully refrained from intruding upon their new neighbors.

At her sister's caution Frances glanced up at the window almost over her head. Then she lowered her voice.

"There's no one at home there but Mary Jane and the cook. The other maid and the chauffeur left last week. It's funny that they can't seem to keep their servants! And the Mortimers, themselves, went away yesterday. To New York on a two weeks trip, Helga says. The expressman told her. Wouldn't you think they'd take Mary Jane on some of their trips? But they never do. Her aunt never even takes her into the city for an afternoon. And she's never with them when they go out driving. Really, you'd think she was one of the maids, instead of their niece, except that they do buy her those wonderful clothes!"

"Well, I can tell you something about those wonderful clothes," Kathleen observed. "Maybe you haven't noticed, but they're all lots too big

for her, except the ones which have obviously been made over. I'm only guessing, but I think they're her aunt's old dresses. Oh, I know they're made of beautiful materials, and must have cost a lot. But just the same, they weren't bought for Mary Jane! And neither were those high-heeled pumps she wears."

"She lost a slipper in the hall one day," Frances said thoughtfully. "At school, I mean. That horrid Carter boy yelled at her, 'Hey, Cinderella!' It must have been too big for her, but I never dreamed—oh, Sis, do you think it's really so? That all she gets are the hand-me-downs when Mrs. Mortimer is through with them?"

"That's what I think. It's one of the reasons I said you were wrong in calling her 'stuck-up.' She's not responsible for those fussy clothes, and I can't believe she's proud of them."

"But she never talks to anybody," Frances objected. "You don't have her in any of your classes, Sis, but I do, and you can't imagine how stand-offish she is! You know that free period we have in the library for history reference? It's lots of fun, really. There's no one in charge but a 9A girl, and she never cares how much we talk as long as we don't make too much noise. Well, Mary Jane sits all by herself in a corner and *studies*, the whole time!"

"Dear me, how unusual!" her sister laughed. "I don't suppose there's another girl in the seventh grade who'd be guilty of such outlandish conduct."

"Well, there isn't," Frances argued seriously. "Not in the whole Junior High, including your own precious 9A, and you know it. Besides, we *do* study. I brought home a History A every month last year, didn't I? But to study every minute, when there's no one to make us—that's not *human*! And anyway, when I say we talk in the library, well, we talk about school most of the time. We even talk about history. So there! Patty Friend brought in her Van Loon's "Story of Mankind" one day because it isn't in the school library, and we all had a grand time looking up what he said about the Protestant Reformation. It was lots more interesting than the textbook, and Miss Talbot was quite pleased because we'd done some outside reading. So if you think—"

"All right, all right, dear," Kathleen interrupted the defence. "I know you study and I'm very, very proud of the work you do in school. What started this argument, anyway?"

"I've forgotten," Frances admitted. "Oh, no, I haven't. We were talking about Mary Jane Smith. Well, *she* wasn't interested in the Van

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Loon book. She never even came to look at it. That's what I mean about her, Sis."

"Maybe she was waiting to be asked."

"Asked? But she was asked. The minute Patty came in the door she said, 'Look, girls, I've brought the history Uncle Fred gave me,' and we all crowded around. Do you mean Mary Jane expected to be asked specially? But why? None of the rest of us did."

"I know, darling, but you girls all know each other, and she's a stranger. I believe she's shy." And Kathleen looked thoughtful.

"But what is there to be shy about? Just a bunch of girls in her own class. She *was* asked to the class party, though, I gave her the invitation to that myself. She thanked me for it quite politely, but she didn't come. And she always hurries off by herself the minute school is out. She never waits for anyone to walk with her. What can I think, except that she considers herself too good for us? It's what all the girls think."

"I don't, though," Kathleen persisted. "I think it's just plain shyness. A new girl in a strange school always has a hard time making friends. And by the way, did you know that Mary Jane wasn't sent to school at all until the truancy officer called on her uncle? You remem-

ber they moved here in August of last year, and Mary Jane didn't enter school until October? Well, that was the reason. Mr. Mortimer was terribly disagreeable about it, too. He said the girl knew enough already, and that his wife needed her at home. That's some of Helga's information, from her policeman cousin."

"Why, no, I didn't know that. I remember she came in late, but I thought she'd been sick or something. You know she's older than anyone else in the grade. She must be at least fourteen. I thought that perhaps she'd been out of school with a long illness, and had fallen behind. But if that's the way her uncle feels, he's probably kept her out as much as he dared, and that's held her back. What a shame!"

"Yes. It may be another reason why she's slow about making friends. She's taller and older than the rest of you girls, and maybe she feels out of place. Does she do good work?"

"I shouldn't say so," Frances answered thoughtfully. "She never recites in class, unless she's called on directly. Then she blushes and stammers and sits down as soon as she can. Her written work is fine, though. I had one of her English term papers to correct, and it was perfect. You'd have thought a real author had written it. Her Latin translations are good, too,

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but she makes a perfect mess of the oral conjugations.”

“Well, all that just proves my theory, that she’s not stuck-up, but shy,” Kathleen insisted. “Of course I haven’t seen as much of her as you have, but that’s what I think.”

“It does sound reasonable,” Frances agreed. “But if it’s so—why, my goodness, then it’s *our* fault that she’s had such a miserable lonely year at school! Mine, and Patty’s, and Charlotte’s! We could all have been nice to her, and we weren’t! You know how the girls are, Sis, they’re the friendliest crowd in the world, and we *do* have fun! I can see now Mary Jane must have thought we were deliberately leaving her out of things, and *we* thought she didn’t want to come in! Oh, what a mixup! And now, school’s out, and Patty and Charlotte are at camp, and the March twins have gone to their grandmother’s. There’s no one left in town but me! It’s just as bad with your crowd, too. We can’t give a party for her, because there’s no one to ask. But we’ve got to do something, we’ve just got to! Think, Sis, what can it be?”

“I suppose it has to be done this very minute?” Kathleen smiled. “I’m afraid it isn’t quite that simple, honey.”

Frances’ passion for “doing something” to

right any real or fancied wrong was a family joke. Scarcely a day passed but that she brought in some pitiful creature to be helped, a stray cat, a crippled dog or an unfledged baby bird. Mrs. Forrester complained mildly that whenever she wanted a bath she found the tub occupied by a foundling turtle or a bewildered minnow. Helga was constantly threatening to leave if Miss Frances didn't stop turning her kitchen into an infirmary for sick animals. Last winter Frances had started out blithely, with the contents of her savings bank, to do her Christmas shopping. She had returned empty-handed because a blind beggar had looked so blue and shivery standing in the snow.

Fourteen-year-old Kathleen, though she pretended to scoff at her younger sister's tenderheartedness, had shared her own Christmas fund on that occasion. And she could usually be depended upon to lend a willing hand in binding up the wounded, and in pacifying Helga.

Remembering Mrs. Mortimer's rebuff of her mother, however, Kathleen felt now that an attempt to compensate Mary Jane for her lonely year at school might present difficulties, especially if carried out in Frances' usual headlong, wholehearted fashion. The idea of giving a party for her, for instance. Mary Jane might be willing

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to come, might be very happy to meet the Forrester girls' friends. But it was just possible that Mary Jane's willingness was not the only factor to be considered.

Mrs. Mortimer's consent would have to be obtained. And Frances' word for Mary Jane flashed into Kathie's mind. "Stuck-up" exactly described Mary Jane's aunt, Kathleen felt sure. The Mortimers were distinctly of the "new-rich" type. The lavish display of money was of supreme importance to them. They did not want social contacts with the Medhurst people themselves, and it was quite probable they would not want them for their niece.

Only a small stretch of lawn separated the Forrester's home from the Mortimer house. Because Mrs. Mortimer's shrill, harsh voice had a penetrating quality, Kathleen felt certain that not all of the scolding she heard was directed at the servants.

Until today, Kathleen had said nothing of these suspicions to Frances. She now began to wish that she had remained silent. She could see nothing but trouble ahead if Frances' passion for righting wrongs led to conflict with Mary Jane's aunt. Sorry as Kathleen was for Mary Jane, she felt that an offer of friendship could only add to her difficulties. It was plain that Mrs. Mortimer did not wish her niece to make

friends among the Medhurst girls. To urge her to do so hardly seemed wise.

"I don't think I'd do anything just now, Kitten," she had started to say, when both girls were startled into silence.

From somewhere in the depths of the Mortimer house, they heard a terrific crash, followed by a loud scream.

An instant later a second-story window flew up almost over their heads. Framed in it the sisters saw the pale, frightened face of the girl they had just been discussing.

"Oh, will you come, please?" she called. "Delia has had an accident! Oh, do *hurry!*"

Kathleen and Frances ran at top speed to their own gate, and raced up the short driveway leading to the Mortimer place.

Mary Jane Smith met them at the open door and hurried them up the stairs.

"She was cleaning the chandelier in my aunt's room, and the stepladder gave way," she explained breathlessly. "I'm afraid she's terribly hurt. The whole thing came down on her. She caught at it to save herself, I think. What shall I do?"

They reached the head of the stairs, and Mary Jane turned toward a large front bedroom, from which came loud groans and wails.

"I don't believe she could make such a fuss if

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she were badly hurt," Kathleen said reassuringly. "Do you want to telephone for a doctor while we do what we can for her? That will save time. Call Dr. Fielding. He's the nearest."

Mary Jane obediently turned back to the telephone on the landing, and Kathleen entered the bedroom, followed by Frances.

A stout Irish woman lay sprawled on the floor, in a tangle of broken stepladder, wrought iron scrollwork and shattered glass.

Kathleen quickly pulled the twisted chandelier away, and Frances, after dragging the stepladder clear, ran to the bathroom for a towel dipped in water.

Kathleen knelt and bathed the woman's face. To her relief she saw at once that there were no deep cuts from the broken glass, but many bleeding scratches.

"There, you're all right now," she said soothingly. "The doctor's coming, and we're right here to help. Oh, do stop groaning and look at me! Where does it hurt most? Can you get up?"

Delia opened her eyes. "Merciful powers, and it's not kilt I am then at all, at all? Oh, glory be, and I made sure I was dead!"

Kathleen laughed. "You're a long way from being dead. Now let's look you over and see what the damage really is. We won't try to do

much until the doctor comes, but I'm sure we can make you more comfortable. No, I'm not going to hurt you. Any bones broken, do you think?"

"All of them, then," the cook answered promptly. "There's a hole in the back of me head you can put your hand into, where that thing crashed onto me, bad luck to it! I can feel me ribs stickin' into me heart. And both legs is broke, but the right one is worse broken than the left. Sure ye'd better be sendin' for the priest, Miss, for it's beyond the doctor's help I am."

"Oh, come now, Delia, it can't be as bad as all that," Kathleen scoffed. "Here, let's see that hole in the back of your head."

She passed her fingers over the sparse gray hair, and felt a rapidly swelling lump.

"There's no hole, but it's a beautiful lump," she reported cheerfully. "Here, feel for yourself."

She guided the old woman's shaking hand to the spot.

"I made sure it was a hole," Delia said wonderingly.

She sat up a little straighter, still leaning heavily against Kathleen, and looked down at her feet, stuck straight out in front of her.

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"But me legs is broke all right," she added gloomily. "I can tell by the feel of 'em. I'll never walk again."

Rapidly, with the skill and confidence her Girl Scout training had given her, Kathleen proceeded with the examination. Although her hands were gentle, Delia winced and groaned at every touch.

Just as she finished, Mary Jane stood in the doorway.

"The doctor won't be in for an hour—they said they'd send him right over. But we can't wait that long, can we? I don't know what to do. Oh, is it—do you think it's serious?"

Kathleen stood up, smiling. "Not very. She has a lump on the back of her head, and some bad bruises, especially a deep one on her chest, where the top of the ladder caught her. The scratches on her face aren't anything. The one real injury seems to be her right ankle. I'm fairly sure it isn't broken, but it's badly sprained. If you two will help me, we'll get her on the bed here and I'll bandage it for her. Just a loose temporary dressing to make it feel better till the doctor comes."

"Oh, not this bed!" Mary Jane protested. "This is my aunt's room. She'd never allow us to use it. Delia's own room is at the back. We can get her there, can't we?"

"I guess so," Kathleen answered shortly. Then she relented as she saw the distress in Mary Jane's eyes. After all, it wasn't the girl's fault if her aunt was such an ogress that one didn't dare to make use of her possessions, even in an emergency.

"Give her your shoulder, Francie. Here, Mary Jane, you come round on this side with me. Now, Delia, you'll have to hop. Don't put that foot down. Oh, yes, you can. Lean on us as heavily as you like. There now, slowly does it. That's fine."

With infinite care they guided the groaning woman down the passage, and into a plain little room at the back of the house.

As soon as she was safe on the narrow iron bed Kathleen turned to Mary Jane.

"Have you any gauze and adhesive tape in the house? And how about witch hazel or alcohol—something that will feel cool? All right, you show Frances where to find them, and then suppose you go down and make Delia a nice cup of hot tea while I put the bandage on. She's going to feel a lot better in a very few minutes, I think."

Half an hour later the patient, comforted by cooling bandages and steaming tea, drifted into a peaceful sleep.

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The three girls hovered about for a few minutes, then quietly left the room.

"We won't disturb her until the doctor comes," Kathleen whispered. "She's had a bad shaking up, and rest is the best thing in the world for her."

They had paused in the upper hallway, and Mary Jane silently motioned them to follow her along the passage.

"I thought perhaps you would come up to my room for a little," she said timidly. "I haven't had a chance to thank you yet for all you've done, and my aunt doesn't allow—she doesn't like me to use the rooms downstairs."

"Of course we will," Kathleen answered, glancing at her wrist watch. "We'll stay until the doctor comes, if you like. There may be something he'll want us to do."

"You are so good! Here, this is the way."

At the very end of the passage Mary Jane paused.

Hanging from the ceiling of ornamental rough plaster was a red velvet cord, ending in a heavy fringed tassel. Mary Jane reached up pulled the tassel gently. To the amazement of her visitors, a flight of narrow wooden steps slid silently down and rested on the floor.

"Good heavens, it's a secret stairway!"

“Oh, no, not secret. All these Spanish-type houses have them instead of attic stairs,” their hostess explained. “It saves space in the hall, you see. But I do like it. It gives me such a wonderful feeling of being cut off from everything, and of having a little castle of my own up here. See, I could pull the cord through on this side if I wanted to, and then nobody could possibly get into the attic. It’s like a draw-bridge. Only of course I never do that, because my aunt wouldn’t like it,” she added hastily.

The girls followed her up the stairs, and the door at the top was left open, so that they might hear if Delia called.

“I have never brought anyone up here before,” Mary Jane confided. “I do hope you like my castle.”

CHAPTER II

RAGTAG CASTLE

THE room, which Mary Jane was so eager to show Kathleen and Frances, extended the entire width of the house. There were four small windows, two at each end. The low ceiling was unfinished, with the rough beams showing, and the floor was of rough pine boards.

At first it seemed merely a jungle of broken furniture, trunks, packing cases and barrels.

But Mary Jane led the way quickly to a cleared space by the south windows where the girls saw a small army cot, a dressing-table with a cracked mirror, and a battered chest of drawers.

The sunlight was waning, so Mary Jane reached up and snapped on a single electric light, covered by a crêpe paper shade. Following her, the girls saw a sofa drawn up under the windows. Its broken springs were sagging to the floor, and its velvet covering was split and faded. Mary Jane motioned them to sit down.

"This is my very own room," she said proudly.

"And isn't it nice!" Kathleen exclaimed.

Frances looked at her sister in amazement. She had noticed the rather elaborate furnishings downstairs, and even the cook's room, though plainly furnished, was luxurious compared with this ragtag attic.

Did Mary Jane mean that she actually *liked* this place, with its jumbled odds and ends? And Kathleen, dainty, fastidious Kathleen, who must always have things just so, had spoken as if she truly admired it!

"No one ever comes up here," Mary Jane repeated, with that unaccountable air of pride. "It's all mine."

And suddenly Frances understood, with a swift rush of pity which brought stinging tears to her eyes.

Why, of course, how stupid she had been! Mary Jane loved her attic because it was hers, the one place in the rich unfriendly house where she could feel at home. Her terror at the idea of putting Delia on her aunt's bed, her apology for not taking them into the living-room for this little visit—these things told their story. This attic room was a refuge. It was here that she came to be alone, safe with the treasures that were hers because no one else thought them worth having.

With new understanding Frances looked about her. The row of battered books on the nearest packing-case, the dressing-table contrived of a wooden box and faded cretonne, the home-made lampshade, the cot with its carefully darned white coverlet—of course these things were precious to Mary Jane, just because they were her very own.

“Oh, I like your castle too, Mary Jane,” she said quickly. “I—I think it’s just beautiful!” Her eyes met Kathleen’s. Neither of them had ever uttered a white lie with a clearer conscience.

Mary Jane’s sad face glowed. “I was afraid you might laugh at it,” she confessed. “You see, I don’t know any girls, and I’m afraid they don’t like me. My aunt says it’s silly to be so sensitive, but I can’t help it. It was such a relief when vacation came. I just hated going to school, knowing that the girls were laughing at my clothes.”

“Your clothes!” Frances exclaimed. “But my dear, we all thought your clothes were gorgeous! Why, we were afraid to speak to you, in our sweaters and cotton prints.”

Mary Jane shook her head. “You can’t mean that, you only say it not to hurt my feelings. I know how I look in—these—” she broke off, looking down at her lap.

She was wearing a yellow chiffon frock, a little frayed and faded, and it hung in awkward folds on her thin body. "I'd give anything, anything for a pink gingham dress that was made for *me!*" she finished passionately.

Frances twisted uncomfortably on the sagging sofa. "Oh, I don't think clothes make much difference, one way or the other," she ventured. "Anyway, we don't judge our friends by their clothes, do we, Kathie?"

"We certainly don't," her sister agreed, putting a warm hand over Mary Jane's. "And you're our friend now, so let's forget clothes and talk about books. What do you read, mostly?"

"You really mean that?" Mary Jane's great dark eyes were traveling slowly from one sister to the other. "I have never had a friend. You really mean that you would be friends—with *me?*"

"That's exactly what we mean," Francie said, and squeezed Mary Jane's other hand. "Oh, there's the doorbell! It must be the doctor." And the girls hurried downstairs to hear his verdict on Delia's injuries.

Dr. Fielding's examination confirmed Kathleen's judgment. He complimented her on her skilful first aid work, and ordered Delia to keep off her feet for several days.

When he had gone Kathleen turned to Mary Jane.

"We must go now. Mother will be wondering what in the world has happened to us. Are you sure you can manage all right by yourself? If you want help just call us. We're close neighbors, you know, although I'm afraid we haven't seemed very neighborly. We'll run over the first thing in the morning and see how Delia is, anyway. Come along, Kitten."

But Frances lingered a moment to whisper shyly in Mary Jane's ear. "I'm so sorry I wasn't nicer to you when you first came, Mary Jane. I'm going to try awfully hard to make up for it now. Just wait, and you'll see!"

CHAPTER III

GOOD NEWS

“WHERE have you been, girls?” Mrs. Forrester was standing in the doorway, her pretty face bright with suppressed excitement. “I’ve looked all over for you!”

“Oh, sorry, Mother dear, we were next door. Mary Jane Smith called us over. She’s the Mortimers’ niece, you know, and she’s in Francie’s class at school.”

“The little girl with the big eyes and the queer clothes? But I didn’t know that you knew her.”

“Well, we didn’t, exactly,” Kathleen answered. “But their cook fell and hurt herself, and she asked us to come, Mary Jane did, I mean. Of course she knew who we were, because she sees us at school and around here. And I did my daily good deed by bandaging up the cook. No, it wasn’t anything serious, just a sprain. Then we stayed for a little talk. Mary Jane’s really a darling, isn’t she, Francie?”

“Oh, Mums, she’s the sweetest thing! And so

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pathetic! That ferocious old aunt of hers just doesn't let her call her soul her own!" Frances plunged eagerly into her impressions of Mary Jane's home life.

Mrs. Forrester listened sympathetically, but a little absently. Kathleen, scanning her mother's face, cut the recital short.

"Never mind all that now, Kitten. It will keep. If I'm not mistaken our lovely mother has some news of her own. With her well-known politeness she's let you tell your story first. Now will you keep still and give her a chance? What is it, Mums? Is it a letter from Daddy?"

Mrs. Forrester nodded, smiling. "A letter—with some wonderful news. Guess what?"

"He's coming home!" Frances shrieked. "Oh, let me see, read it to us, quick! Oh, Sis, aren't you excited? When, Mums? Where's the letter?"

"Come and sit down, and we'll read it together."

Mrs. Forrester led the way into the pleasant living-room and sank upon the chintz-covered davenport by the window, with an eager daughter on either side. From her pocket she produced a thick envelope, and Frances pressed close against her shoulder. "Read it out loud,

Mums!" she begged. "Every word. And please hurry!"

Mrs. Forrester drew out the crackling pages. She was quite as excited as the sisters. Mr. Forrester was a civil engineer, and for the past two years he had been in China, directing the building of a bridge to span the mighty Hoang-ho River. His last letter had told them that the task was almost completed, and that they could expect him home shortly, but they had not dared to hope that it would be as soon as this.

"*My dear ones,*" Mrs. Forrester obediently began reading aloud. "*I had so many things to attend to at the last moment that I did not find time to write you that I was sailing. Will you forgive me? This letter, which I shall send by air-mail as soon as we land in San Francisco, will come to you as a surprise. I shall be with you again almost as soon as it reaches you, as I arrive in Medhurst by the 6:10 on Wednesday evening. I only hope you're all as glad as I am!*"

"*I have another surprise also,*" Mrs. Forrester read on, "*for which perhaps I should have prepared you in advance. I am bringing you a guest.*"

"*I forget whether I mentioned in my other*

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letters that I had engaged an assistant here, a Russian political refugee named Boris Mazaroff. He has been invaluable to me, in fact it was his handling of the coolies which speeded up the work so that we have finished so soon. I want him for the Mexican job I'm to start this fall, so I'm bringing him along.

"If it isn't convenient to have him in the house this summer he can go to the hotel. I'm afraid he won't appeal to you a great deal. He's a refugee, as I said, a former officer in the Imperial army. You can guess that he's had his troubles, and they've made him—well, you'll see for yourself. I like him, personally, but he's silent and reserved, not the best of company for young people. However, we'll settle that point when I arrive.

"And now, my darlings, there is no more to write. I am counting every day, every hour, until I'm home again.

*"With all my love,
"Daddy."*

"Wednesday! Why, it's day after tomorrow!" Frances had listened patiently enough to the reading of the letter, but it was very plain that only the first paragraph seemed important to her.

"Oh, Mums, do you think he'll know me? I've

grown such a lot! There's all the difference in the world between ten and twelve, don't you think? Do look at me, Mums. Have I changed much since Daddy went away?"

Mrs. Forrester smiled down into the flushed little face.

"Not such a lot that Daddy won't know you, I'm sure. You're wearing your curls long instead of bobbed, and you've lost some of your little-girl chubbiness. Those are all the changes I can see. He'll know you by the dimples, dear. They haven't changed."

Kathleen had taken the letter from her mother's lap and was silently re-reading it. Her joy was quite as great as Francie's, but she was quieter, and much less inclined to show her feelings. Presently she looked up.

"This Russian gentleman—of course we'll have him here, won't we, Mother? You can see that Daddy wants him. What do you suppose he'll be like?"

Mother shook her head. "I don't think I've ever seen a real Russian in my life. But, yes, we'll fix up the guest room for him. And we'll be nice to him, won't we, girls? Even if he isn't very pleasant company. Daddy's been trying for years to find a really good assistant, someone he can rely on to direct his workmen. If

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this man suits him, and he must, or Daddy wouldn't be bringing him all the way from China, I'm very glad he found him."

"Let me read that part again," Frances said. "I was so excited about Daddy's coming home that I didn't half listen. Do we *have* to have a stranger in the house all summer? I'm not a bit sure I'm going to like that."

"You'd better like it," her sister warned her, handing her the letter. "Here, this is all it says about him."

Frances' brow cleared as she read, and when she looked up her eyes were dancing. "Oh, I didn't know he'd been an officer in the Imperial army! But that's terribly romantic! There was a fascinating movie at the Adelphi last week, all about the Russian Revolution. The hero was just too noble for words. He was one of the Tsar's officers too, and they were going to execute him, and he said 'Better a thousand times death than dishonor!' He wore the sweetest uniform, and he was *handsome*, oh, simply divine! Of course he didn't really die, the girl saved him in the nick of time. And they were married and lived happily ever after. *He* was a prince. Do you suppose Daddy's Russian could be a prince, Mums?"

"I'm afraid not," Mrs. Forrester smiled.

“Daddy didn’t say anything about this Mr.—Mr. Mazaroff, isn’t it?—having a title.”

“He *could* be a prince,” Kathleen put in, as Frances’ face showed her disappointment. “There were lots of princes in old Russia, and all the army officers were noblemen of some kind, weren’t they? Not that having been one is any use to poor Mr. Mazaroff now!”

“Oh, but it’s a lot of use to me!” Frances breathed. “Just think of a prince sleeping in our guest room, and brushing his teeth before the very same mirror I do! Can you imagine it?”

“Goose!” said her mother indulgently. “I suppose you’re already picturing this poor man as a fairy tale Prince Charming. It’s a long time since the war, and from what Daddy said he must have been through some unhappy experiences. Whatever he may have been once, he’s Daddy’s assistant and our guest now. So we’re going to be very nice to him and make him welcome, aren’t we, girls?”

“Of course we are.” Kathleen squeezed her mother’s arm. “We owe him a lot, really, because Daddy says he couldn’t have finished so quickly if it hadn’t been for Mr. Mazaroff’s help. Let’s go tell Helga the good news, Francie. She’ll be tickled to death to have Daddy home

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again. He's always been her favorite of all of us."

That night, as the girls were preparing for bed, Frances glanced out of her window and noticed a lonely little light burning high in the otherwise dark house next door.

"Poor Mary Jane," she murmured. "I wish we could help her in some way."

Then her thoughts turned to more exciting things. "Just think, Sis! *Daddy!* The only thing is, I don't see how I'm going to live through the hours till six o'clock Wednesday. And we'll have him the whole summer long, not just a stingy little week or two. Do you suppose he'll bring me a mandarin coat, Kathie? You remember I asked him when he went away, and he said he'd think about it? That meant, 'Yes,' don't you think?"

"I expect so," Kathleen answered absently. "Oh, I don't care whether he brings us a single present, Francie. Just think, we'll have *him* again!"

CHAPTER IV

MARY JANE'S PROBLEM

THE next day was a busy one. Helga, the Swedish maid-of-all-work who had been with the Forresters since Kathleen's babyhood, plunged into a frenzy of housecleaning in preparation for the arrival of "the mister." Both girls were pressed into service, and they willingly waxed furniture and polished silver, for it helped to fill the endless hours that seemed to stretch forward until Wednesday evening's train.

When the sisters had been quite small Mrs. Forrester had explained to them that Daddy's profession called him to distant parts of the earth where they could not follow, and that, instead of complaining because their father could not be with them, they must be brave and accept his long absences cheerfully.

She set them a splendid example, and life in the little household ran along very pleasantly, though there was always a sense of waiting, of wonderful things to be done "when Daddy comes home." This last absence of two years was the

longest the girls could remember, but now even it was ending.

In the late afternoon, the girls finished their final task. There was time enough, they decided, to run over to Mary Jane's house before dinner to see how Delia was getting along.

Mary Jane opened the door, and her pale face lighted with pleasure, when she saw her visitors.

"Oh, you did come, after all! I thought you had forgotten!"

"Of course we didn't forget," Kathleen assured her. "We meant to come over the first thing this morning, but there's been all kinds of excitement at our house. Just think of it! We haven't seen our father in two years, and he's coming home tomorrow!"

"Your father?" Mary Jane echoed. "Why, I didn't know you had one."

Kathleen laughed. "It's a long story, and I'll tell you all about it in a minute. But first of all, how is my patient?"

"Delia? Oh, she's doing splendidly. She's asleep now, but she sat up for a little while after lunch, and the pain in her ankle is much better. But I'm keeping you standing here at the door. Do come in. I wonder—" Mary Jane blushed a little, "would you mind coming to the kitchen? I—my aunt—I mean, it's really

very pleasant out there. I'll make us some lemonade. It's terribly hot today. You don't mind?"

"Of course not. I love kitchens!" Kathleen answered quickly.

The sunny kitchen to which Mary Jane led them was a pleasant place, with its gaily painted breakfast nook. Still a little confused, their hostess seated them on a highbacked settle before the table, and disappeared into the pantry.

"I call that mean!" Frances whispered indignantly. Mrs. Mortimer doesn't allow her to use the living-room! You remember, she told us the other day—"

"Sh, I know," Kathleen whispered back. "Poor Mary Jane, she can't help it. Don't hurt her feelings by noticing. Next time we'll come to the back door. That'll make it easier for her."

Mary Jane reappeared, with tall glasses in which ice tinkled pleasantly.

"Now do tell me about your father," she begged, dropping into the seat opposite them.

Between sips of lemonade, Mary Jane listened eagerly to the tale of Mr. Forrester's travels, and of how he had returned so many times laden with beautiful gifts from strange lands.

"It must be wonderful to have a father," she

said wistfully when they had finished. "And a mother. Two people who really belong to you! I've often wondered what it would be like."

"You are an orphan, then, Mary Jane?" Kathleen asked gently. "I didn't know for sure."

"I've never been anything else," the other girl answered. "At least, I can't remember anyone but my aunt and uncle, who have taken care of me since I was a tiny baby. They have been very good," she added hastily. "You mustn't think I'm ungrateful. But it isn't quite like they were my very own, is it?"

Her dark eyes misted with tears, and it occurred to Frances that they were the saddest eyes she had ever seen. Even when Mary Jane was smiling, those enormous eyes looked mournful, and the distress in them now was more than Frances could bear.

She reached across the table and patted Mary Jane's hand.

"I am sorry—oh, I am!" she cried. "But please, Mary Jane, don't be so sad! It's dreadful to have your parents dead, of course, but you must just think that they're happy in heaven, and—and—"

"But I can't even think that!" Mary Jane broke in, and the dark eyes were stormy now. "How can they be in heaven, when they were

wicked, cruel? Oh! I—I didn't mean to tell you that!" she paused, aghast.

"Well, I should hope not!" Frances exclaimed in horror. "The very idea of saying such a thing about your own parents! I never—"

"Hush, honey." Kathleen's voice was stern, and Frances subsided. "I thought you didn't remember your parents, Mary Jane," she went on quietly. "Why do you say they were wicked and cruel?"

"My aunt says so. And my uncle, too. And you can't know how it hurts, Kathleen! Other girls lose their parents, but anyway they can think kindly of them. I can't even do that. Do you wonder that I'm moody and queer? But you can't understand, nobody can understand what it's like to be *me!*"

"I'm trying to understand," Kathleen answered patiently. "What did your parents do, Mary Jane, that was so bad?"

"I don't know. I've asked my aunt, but she says it's too terrible to talk about. All she will say is that I come of wicked, wicked people, and that I must be very grateful that she and my uncle were kind enough to take me in. No one else would. And I *am* grateful! But I just can't do as she says and learn to hate my parents! I've tried, and I can't *do* it, Kathleen!"

With a warning look Kathleen checked the indignant exclamation that rose to her sister's lips. Very carefully she chose her own words.

"There is good in even the worst people, Mary Jane. Whatever your parents were like, they *were* your parents, and no one should expect you to hate them. Your aunt had no right to tell you to do that, and you should be glad, instead of sorry, that you can't feel that way."

"But my aunt says—"

"I don't care what your aunt says," Kathleen answered firmly. "You live in her house, and you owe her respect and obedience. But that doesn't mean you have to think what she tells you to think. My goodness, you're almost fifteen years old, aren't you? Surely that's old enough to begin to think for yourself."

Mary Jane drew a deep breath. "If I only dared! I've tried to remember something about my father and mother, but I can't, not the least little thing! But I dream of them, almost every night. At least, I dream of the parents I'd like to have had—I suppose that's it. They're always sweet and gentle, with soft, loving voices, and then I wake and remember what my aunt said. You don't know how dreadful that is!"

"It must be," Kathleen answered warmly. "And if I were you I'd stop bothering about

what your aunt says. People have different ideas. What seems dreadful to your aunt might not be at all, if you knew everything. If she won't give you any facts, you don't have to take her opinion for absolute truth. I know if anyone tried to tell me my father was wicked, they'd have to give me a lot of proof before I'd even listen to them."

"Yes, but you *know* your father," Mary Jane said forlornly. "That's what hurts the most, not knowing! I've begged and begged my aunt to tell me about my people, but she never will. It's like a black cloud that seems to smother me. I don't think I'd mind anything if I could only *know*!"

"Oh, well, cheer up," Kathleen comforted. "You've been brooding over all this because you didn't have anyone to talk to. If your aunt's like that, well, she's like that. There's nothing you can do about it right now. Maybe when you're older she'll tell you more. So just stop worrying! *I* don't believe for one minute that your father and mother were bad people, and I don't see why you should believe it either."

"And you don't think it's ungrateful of me not to feel as my aunt tells me?" Mary Jane asked eagerly.

"Certainly not! You have every right to

think kindly of your parents, and I shouldn't like you a bit if you didn't. There now, don't you feel better for talking it all out?"

"Oh, I do! I never talked about it to anybody before. I—I dreaded telling you girls. Yesterday, when you said we would be friends, I knew I'd have to, and I was afraid you wouldn't want to be friends when you knew about me."

"Well, of all the crazy notions!" Frances broke in. "We told you yesterday, Mary Jane, that we don't pick our friends by their clothes. And we certainly don't pick them by their relatives! I don't believe a word of it, anyway. Your aunt's exaggerating some family squabble, giving you *her* side of it when she knows your poor dead parents can't defend themselves. That's mean and cowardly, and if you want to know what I think of that precious aunt of yours—"

"She doesn't, Kitten," Kathleen interrupted. "After all, Mary Jane had to go on living with her aunt, so there was no point in stirring her to indignation. "We've been serious long enough, anyway," she went on. "Mary Jane is going to give up brooding over things that can't be helped, and we're going to have a lot of fun together this summer. Isn't that right, Mary Jane?"

Mary Jane's smile was a little tremulous. "I hope so. But I'm afraid I don't know much about having fun. It sounds nice."

"It's great! you'll love it!" Frances laughed.

"But just the same— Oh, all right, Sis, I'll keep quiet. But I could be arrested for what I'm thinking right now. Listen! The patient's awake."

From over their heads came a sound of pounding, and Mary Jane got up quickly.

"I told Delia to knock on the floor when she was ready for her tea. You're coming up to see her, of course? She wants to thank you both. She's really a dear old soul, much the nicest cook we've ever had. Just a minute, while I get her tray ready."

Frances followed her into the pantry, where she was slicing bread for toast.

"And remember, no more gloom, Mary Jane," she said threateningly. "I've had just about all I can stand this afternoon, I don't mind telling you. Listen, did you ever laugh? Right out loud? I'll bet you never did. As a very special favor to me, would you mind trying it just once? Come on, now, don't be stubborn. Just one great big laugh for Francie?"

To her own surprise, Mary Jane responded to the suggestion with a half-hearted little

chuckle. "Why, you're right, I don't believe I ever did that before!" she exclaimed.

"It wasn't so good," Frances answered critically. "Not enough steam behind it. Could have been worse, though, for a first attempt. Don't be discouraged. You stick to me, Mary Jane. You'll learn to laugh, and like it, before I'm through with you!"

CHAPTER V

BORIS MAZAROFF

WEDNESDAY's train had come and gone. Mr. Forrester had been rapturously welcomed at the station and hurried home to a dinner which represented Helga's idea of a fitting meal. It was one which might well have served as a banquet to visiting royalty.

Quaint, delightful little gifts for all the family had emerged from Daddy's suitcases. And there were exciting hints of more treasures to come when his trunks should be delivered.

It was long past bedtime now, but Mrs. Forrester had not the heart to break up the family gathering in the cozy living-room. There were so many things to tell, and to hear. It was impossible to realize that Daddy would be with them for the whole summer; that there would be tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, time enough for everything.

Mr. Mazaroff, who looked frail and ill, had asked if he might go to his room immediately after dinner, so there was no strange presence to dampen the excited chatter.

Frances had realized at first glance that their visitor was in no way like the dashing Russian nobleman of the motion picture. He was thin, almost emaciated, with white hair and a weary, lined face. He had scarcely spoken during dinner, and he had eaten almost nothing.

During a momentary pause in the after dinner chatter, Daddy had asked Mother about their guest rather hesitantly.

"What shall we do with Mazaroff, my dear? It was nice of you to put him up for the night, but he can perfectly well go to the hotel in the morning. He won't be offended. All places are alike to him."

"Well, I don't know, Hugh. It won't inconvenience us to have him here if you want him. But—but—"

"But you don't think he'll be much of an addition to the family circle? I'm afraid you're right there. He's pretty gloomy, never a word to say, and I suppose the girls might find him rather a wet blanket. Maybe we'd better put it up to them."

"Tell us something about him, Daddy," Kathleen suggested. "Who is he, anyway? He speaks like an educated man, and his manners are perfect. But there's something odd about him. He—he just doesn't seem to be *here*, somehow. His

eyes look right through you, and away off to something you can't see."

"I know what you mean. The things he sees—well, we can only guess at them, but they're not pretty! I'll tell you the little I know of him, and you can decide for yourselves, the three of you, whether you want him in the family."

He paused for a minute, and his audience waited for his next words with keen interest. "I found Boris at the inn in the little village where we established our construction camp," Mr. Forrester began slowly. "He was doing odd jobs about the place for his keep, sleeping in the stables. He was dirty and ragged, half-starved, and suffering from an unhealed wound in his knee. You may have noticed that he limps still? The innkeeper told me he had wandered in from the North a year or two before. Boris is a 'White' Russian, if you know what that means. Sympathetic with the old *regime*, and against the Revolution. Many were killed when the Bolshevik government came into power, and others fled for their lives. Boris was one of these."

"But how did he ever get to China?" Kathleen asked. "That's clear across Asia."

"I don't know, my dear. There are many White Russians in China. They made the night-

mare journey somehow, against incredible hardships. Boris has told me very little of his wanderings. I questioned him when I first engaged him, but all he said was that he had left Russia, 'for political reasons.' The important thing to me was that he is a graduate of the old Imperial Military Academy, which in its day was the equal to our own West Point. That means that he is a thoroughly trained engineer. I thought I was very lucky to find such a man in such a place, and I didn't ask too many questions."

"I think *he* was lucky too," Mrs. Forrester said. "Everyone would not engage a man who is so reticent about himself, especially for a position of trust."

"I didn't trust him too far at first," Mr. Forrester smiled. "He started as gang boss over the coolies. He speaks Chinese and English, by the way, as well as a half dozen other languages. But he proved so competent that I gradually gave him more and more responsibility, until he finally became a full-fledged assistant. You're thinking I should have investigated him more thoroughly, perhaps? Especially before bringing him here? Well, he's a gentleman, and honest! He won't run off with the spoons, if that's what worries you. But, no, I can't give you any assurances about the man. I took him on faith,

and I've had no reason to regret it. He's proved invaluable on the job. He's a hard worker, and he has plenty of courage. Why, there wasn't another man in camp who'd have plunged into that raging torrent after me—"

"What!" Mother sat up very straight. "Plunged into a 'raging torrent'? 'After you'? Hugh, what do you mean?"

Mr. Forrester laughed a little shamefacedly. "There, I've told you, and I didn't mean to! Now every time I go near a river you'll be frightened that I'll fall in. And I assure you it never happened before, and certainly won't happen again. But—well, I suppose you'll have to have the story.

"It was only a few weeks before we sailed. The Chinese government had asked me to look over a site on a smaller river, not far from the camp, where they were thinking of building a dam. I took Mazaroff and several coolies, and we made an overnight trip of it.

"The place was in a deep mountain gorge, where the river is very swift, with a waterfall not far below. Not a practicable site, as it turned out, and the idea of the dam has been abandoned. But you don't care about that. I was making a rough survey from the bank, and—oh, there's no excuse for me—I lost my balance and fell in."

"How terrible!" Frances, perched on her father's lap, clutched him tightly around the neck as though the danger had not yet passed. "Go *on*, Daddy! What happened?"

"It wouldn't have been serious, except that I hit my head on a rock and was temporarily stunned, so that I couldn't help myself at all. The strong current was carrying me away, and without a moment's hesitation Mazaroff plunged in after me. Somehow or other he steered us both to a big boulder in mid-stream, and held us there until the men could get a rope across. I wasn't a bit the worse for it, but poor Boris got a sharp attack of pneumonia from being in the icy water so long. For a while I was afraid he wouldn't pull through. There, that's all. Quite a tame story, really, and you must never mention it to him. He hates having a fuss made over it."

"Tame!" Mrs. Forrester exclaimed. "But the man saved your life! Do you mean that we're not even to thank him?"

"Much better not. I'm thanking him in the only way I can, by taking him out of his wretched surroundings and giving him a chance in his profession. Not that that's any great kindness on my part, for he's going to be mighty useful to me. But he'd much rather have nothing said about the life-saving stunt, and if you'll

just be nice to him, and make him feel at home in a strange land, it'll be the best way you can thank him."

"Well, we'll certainly do that!" Mother agreed fervently. "Of course there's no question of his going to the hotel now, is there, girls?"

"I should say not!" Kathleen answered, but she spoke for both. "He looks terribly ill. We'll do everything we can to take care of him. I don't see how we can ever do enough to repay him for what he did for you, Daddy."

"And we won't mind if he's the worst old grouch in the world," Frances promised.

"I don't think he's that, dear. He's silent by nature, and right now he's weak from illness. But he hasn't an unpleasant personality at all, when you come to know him. I'm hoping that a summer of rest here, with good food and no worries, will put him on his feet again."

"Well, we'll do our share," Mrs. Forrester said. "And speaking of rest—look at the clock! You must get to bed, darlings. Daddy's tired, I know. And remember, he'll be here when you wake up in the morning."

CHAPTER VI

“WHILE THE CAT’S AWAY”

THIS summer vacation, which had begun as rather a dull one for the Forrester girls, was proving unusually pleasant. It was exciting to have Daddy coming home to dinner every night, to sit with him through the long warm evenings, and to listen to his vivid descriptions of life in a Chinese village. They saw nothing of him during the day, since his business affairs took him into the city every morning, but for the daytime there was Mary Jane.

Delia was still helpless in her chair, and Mary Jane did not like to leave her. Most of the visiting, therefore, was done by Frances and Kathleen. Almost every afternoon was spent in the Mortimer kitchen, or in Mary Jane’s attic room.

Old Delia, as the pain left her, proved to be a jolly soul, needing little actual care, and sincerely anxious that her young charge should enjoy herself, “While the chanst is on ye,” as she said darkly. Delia had been employed by Mrs. Mortimer for only a short time, but she was the first of the long succession of servants to take a

motherly interest in Mary Jane, it appeared, and the girl was devoted to her.

“I’m so afraid she won’t stay,” she told them once. “They never do stay very long with my aunt. And Delia’s so good! She’s as pleased that you girls are nice to me as, well, as I am!”

Kathleen had smiled at that, and remarked that Delia was an old dear, but even as she spoke a thought came to her. Delia was pleased that Mary Jane had made friends of her own age. But would the mistress of the house be equally pleased?

Impatiently she dismissed the thought. They were doing no harm, and Mary Jane was happy in the new comradeship. Why should her aunt object? Naturally when Mrs. Mortimer returned they would not spend so much time in her house. Mary Jane always had many more duties when her aunt was home, and her leisure was limited. But that was all the more reason why she should enjoy her vacation now.

The sisters were surprised to learn the variety of tasks which Mary Jane spoke of as hers. Ordinarily her aunt kept a general maid and a houseman-chauffeur who also looked after the lawn and furnace. These, with a cook, would seem an adequate staff for so small a family, but Mrs. Mortimer apparently thought otherwise.

Mary Jane had always done the dusting and the dishwashing, she told them. When she was very small her aunt taught her to darn and mend, and she kept Mrs. Mortimer's large wardrobe in order. In addition to these regular duties, she "helped out" wherever she was needed, in the frequent intervals between servants. Mary Jane's accomplishments covered every phase of domestic work, from salad making to furnace tending.

Mary Jane spoke of her work in the house as a matter of course, and without resentment. As she was dependent upon the charity of her aunt and uncle, she considered it only right that she should make herself useful. Although she was too honest to pretend an affection she could not feel, she always spoke of her relatives with careful respect. She did not again refer to the confidences she had made that day in the kitchen. And her new friends had almost forgotten them.

Perhaps the Mortimers weren't so bad after all, Kathleen told herself comfortably. They were giving the girl a home, and she was being fed, clothed, and educated. Kathleen's own mother believed that the daughters of the house should help with the household tasks, although certainly not to the extent that Mrs. Mortimer insisted upon. With the strident voiced aunt so

far away, it was easy to reassure oneself. Mary Jane had grown, as she herself put it, “moody and queer” because she was lonely. That was all. Now that she had friends, everything would be all right.

So Kathleen reasoned, and she congratulated herself on being sensible.

Only tenderhearted little Frances still remembered the despair in Mary Jane’s dark eyes as she had cried, “Oh, if I could only *know!*” Such longings are not easily stilled, even though one has learned to laugh and be cheerful, Frances thought.

In her bed at night, while Kathleen slept peacefully beside her, Frances would puzzle over the strange girl’s problem. Who was she? Who were her parents? What was the dreadful thing they had done, the “wickedness” of which Mrs. Mortimer spoke so definitely? Was it something so terrible that she had refused, out of kindness, to tell the girl? Frances considered that idea, and rejected it. There was nothing in the aunt’s treatment of Mary Jane to show that there was any kindness in her nature.

Then why didn’t she tell whatever it was? Frances felt, as she knew that Mary Jane did, that even the knowledge that one was the child of criminals could not be as bad as this dark secrecy.

If only they had some clue, some way of finding out the truth! But there was none, and as drowsiness approached each night, Frances could only fall back on her old resolution to be "extra nice" to poor Mary Jane, to make up to her for all her loneliness and worry.

The two girls were tidying up their room on a morning just a week after Daddy's return. They were hurrying, because they had invited Mary Jane to luncheon. It was the first opportunity they had had of presenting their new friend to their mother.

"Is Mr. Mazaroff going to be here, I wonder?" Frances asked. "I haven't seen him since breakfast. Did he go into town with Daddy?"

"No, he's lying down in his room. I heard Daddy tell him not to get up today. He had a bad night. He was coughing a lot, and I thought he looked perfectly ghastly at the breakfast table."

"It's a shame he doesn't get better," Frances said sympathetically. "Daddy says he isn't really sick, he's just utterly worn out and exhausted. Does it always take this long to get well after pneumonia?"

"Oh, no, not if the person has been healthy before having it. But poor Mr. Mazaroff has been through a lot! Half-starved, and sleeping out

in the cold! He must have had a terrible time before Daddy rescued him.”

“Poor man! What do you really think of him, now that he’s been here a whole week, Kathie? Do you like him?”

“I think I do,” Kathleen answered consideringly. “At first I felt, well, not at ease with him. His manners are exquisite, but he’s so solemn and silent that he made me feel uncomfortable. I’m getting used to him now, though. And I realize that he isn’t unfriendly, he’s just uninterested. Nothing in the world seems to matter to him. Except Daddy, of course. The only time he wakes up and *talks* is when he and Daddy discuss this new Mexican job. The rest of the time he’s just like a shadow in the house.”

“Oh, well, I suppose it’s just because he’s been ill,” Frances commented. “*I* like him, at least, I would if he’d let me. I never can think of a thing to say to him, but I love the way he bows, and he treats Mother as if she were a duchess. And he certainly tries not to give trouble. When he doesn’t go to town with Daddy he sits out on the lawn in a deck chair and doesn’t bother anybody.”

“That’s what Daddy wants him to do—rest, I mean,” Kathleen said. “He told Mr. Mazaroff this morning that he could help a lot more by getting his strength back, than by going to the

office. I wonder if he's coming down to luncheon? I'd rather he didn't, since Mary Jane will be here. She's so painfully shy with strangers."

"He'll come down," Frances predicted. "He'd never give Helga the trouble of fixing a tray for him. Is that all up here, Sis? Let's go. Mary Jane ought to be here any minute."

They found Mr. Mazaroff in the living-room, as Frances had predicted. Mother was scolding him gently for getting up, but he insisted that he had had a long nap, and felt much better.

The door bell rang, and Frances ran to admit Mary Jane. Since Mr. Mazaroff was to be with them, she found herself wishing, for an instant, that her guest had had other clothes to wear.

An elaborate gown of mauve satin, did nothing to emphasize Mary Jane's unusual and beautiful combination of dark eyes and ash blonde hair, and she looked shy and uncomfortable. Her chiffon stockings showed several neatly-mended "runs," and her high-heeled slippers were badly scuffed. The sisters had explained to Mother about Mary Jane's clothes, but the strange gentleman would think—what could he think? Certainly that their friend had no taste whatever!

But his grave courtesy when Mary Jane was presented held no hint of criticism. As they seated themselves at the table, Frances reflected

comfortably that probably he hadn’t noticed, after all. Mother, bless her, was being very sweet to the guest, and soon Mary Jane was settling into the circle as though she belonged there.

When lunch was over, Kathleen and Frances carried Mary Jane off to their own room. She glanced around the sunny, airy place with delight. It was simple enough, with its green painted furniture and bright cretonne hangings, but it was palatial by comparison with Mary Jane’s tumbled attic.

“We’re going to the movies later in the afternoon, Mary Jane,” Frances announced. “I know you said you’d never been allowed to go, but your aunt can’t object to this. It’s a new travel picture, and they say it’s wonderful.”

“Oh, I don’t think—”

“Of course you’re going! Mother doesn’t like us to go to just any picture that comes along, either. But this is different.”

“You mustn’t try to influence Mary Jane, Francie,” Kathleen warned. “If her aunt doesn’t approve of motion pictures—”

“Oh, it isn’t that,” Mary Jane explained. “She and my uncle often go. But she thinks it’s a waste of time for me to go, besides the expense. So I’ve never seen a picture.”

"Well, if that's all, there's no reason why you shouldn't see one this afternoon," Kathleen said briskly. "You're our guest, and you're not neglecting any duties. We'll stop at your house and see that Delia has some magazines to read. She won't mind being left, I know. So that's settled."

"Oh, you're so good!" Mary Jane exclaimed. "You are always doing nice things for me; I don't know how I'll ever be able to thank you. And your mother was so sweet to me, and the foreign gentleman was so polite. I do think this is the pleasantest house I've ever been in!"

And that's not saying a lot, Frances reflected, pityingly. If she's always lived with that awful aunt, this is the *only* pleasant house she's ever been in. Well, things are going to be as pleasant for her as I can make them, she resolved again.

"We'd better be going, I expect," Kathleen said presently. "You don't want to miss even a little of your first movie, Mary Jane. I think you're going to like it!"

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN WITH THE BEARD

DELIA's ankle was so much better now that she was able to hobble downstairs, although the doctor still forbade her to stand for any length of time.

She hated idleness, and insisted on taking the preparation of their meals out of Mary Jane's hands, leaving her only the care of the house. This did not amount to a great deal, since most of the rooms were closed in Mrs. Mortimer's absence. Mary Jane found herself with more free time than she had ever known.

Frances discovered to her disappointment that it was impossible to draw Mary Jane into the circle of her own acquaintances. Only a few girls of "the crowd" remained in town for the long hot summer, but Frances gave a little party one afternoon for the half-dozen available, and asked Mary Jane to meet them. All of the girl's stiff shyness returned. She sat silent and uncomfortable throughout the afternoon's chatter.

"It's her clothes, I suppose," Frances confided to her sister later. "She's conscious of them all the time, and it's no use telling her the girls don't

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care what she wears. I'm so disappointed. I thought she'd love this, and it's only made her miserable."

"Well, never mind, honey," her sister consoled her. "She has to get used to people sometime, and it's bound to be awkward at first. Next time it'll be easier, now that she's found the girls don't bite. Let's take her on a hike, and just ask 'Lisbet and Molly. Get her accustomed to society in small doses."

Kathleen's plan worked out more satisfactorily. Both Kathleen and Frances were delighted to see Mary Jane listening with unselfconscious interest as Molly told her the story of the "Lover's Leap" rock where they ate their picnic luncheon.

They realized, however, that Mary Jane was happiest when only the three of them were together, and so they did not insist that she make many new acquaintances. That would come about more naturally when school opened again.

That Mary Jane was happy in this new world of leisure and laughter, of "having fun," could not be questioned. She seemed to bloom before their eyes. Her cheeks lost their sallow paleness, and a delicate peach tint showed through the healthy sun-tan. The drooping corners of her mouth lifted. The great dark eyes lost their look of patient sadness. Even Mary Jane's queer

clothes could not hide the fact that now she was actually pretty.

On a rainy afternoon about two weeks from the day of Delia's injury, the three girls were gathered in Mary Jane's attic. The sisters were embroidering a set of guest towels for Mother's birthday, and, since it was to be a surprise, they kept their work at Mary Jane's. She was working on the towels too, in an effort to show her appreciation for Mrs. Forrester's kindness.

Mary Jane had been very quiet all afternoon, and Frances, glancing at her as she bent over her work, wondered uneasily if her face did not show a trace of the old unhappiness. Although she tried to dismiss the thought, it persisted. At last she asked, "Is there anything wrong, Mary Jane? You look as though you had something on your mind."

Mary Jane started. "Do I? How can you tell?"

"Never mind how. What is it, anyway? Have you had bad news?"

Mary Jane dropped her embroidery frame on her lap. "I'm afraid I have, Francie. My aunt and uncle will be home tonight."

"Oh, is that all?" Frances laughed. "I thought it must be something dreadful."

"It *is* dreadful," the other girl answered slowly,

“to me, that is. For it means the end of our friendship, and of all our good times. Oh, I know it’s hard for you to believe that!” she went on passionately. “Your people are so different. They *want* you to be happy, to have friends! These two weeks have been just part of your everyday life to you, but to me they’ve been a kind of dream, from which I always knew I’d have to wake. I—I don’t want to complain, but I’ve known all along that our good times couldn’t last. And I’ve told myself, that when the time came to give them up, I’d do it without making a fuss. I meant to have this one lovely afternoon without saying anything, and then tell you quietly that it was all over, Francie.”

Her eyes were dry, but filled with the old misery which Frances had hoped was gone forever.

Helplessly she groped about for consolation. “I’m sure it won’t be that bad, honey. Of course you’ll have more work to do when your aunt’s home, and I know she’s cross, but you’ll still have us. That ought to help.”

“But I won’t be allowed to have you!” Mary Jane insisted. “*Can’t* you understand? I’m not allowed to have friends! I never have been! My aunt says it’s a wicked waste of time, running around with other girls, and she has never per-

mitted it. There's always work for me to do when she's here, anyway. It's no use hoping. She won't let me go to your house, or let me invite you here. She won't *let* me!"

"Are you sure, Mary Jane?" Kathleen asked. "It doesn't sound reasonable to me. You must have had some playmates when you were little, surely."

"I never did," Mary Jane answered drearily. "Oh, I know it doesn't sound reasonable to you. It doesn't to me, now, though it always seemed natural enough before you came. After all, I'm only a poor relation. I don't want to criticize my aunt, and I do try to remember to be grateful. But you don't know what it's like in this house! I've tried so hard, ever since I was a tiny bit of a thing, to please her, and I never can. Everything I do is wrong, everything I want is wicked. Sometimes—I suppose this is wicked too, but sometimes I wish my aunt hadn't been quite so kindhearted. An orphan asylum would have saved her all the trouble I've been, and—and it would have been pleasanter for me!" she ended bitterly.

"But Mary Jane, how dreadful!" Frances stared at her. "Do you mean that she—she's cruel to you?"

"No, I don't mean that," Mary Jane answered.

"She isn't cruel. The policeman asked me that too, and I didn't even know what the word meant, I was so little. So he asked if my aunt beat me, and I said, 'No,' and he asked if I got enough to eat, and I said, 'Yes,' and—oh, I don't know. He was nice, and I thought he was going to help me. But after he asked all those questions, he took me back to her."

"Policeman? What *are* you talking about, Mary Jane?" Kathleen demanded. "What policeman? When? Where?"

"The time I ran away. I haven't told you about that, I guess. It was when we lived in New York. I was only about nine. I—my aunt scolded me about something, and she'd been talking about how dreadful my parents were. Suddenly I thought I wouldn't stand it any longer, I'd just go away. So I went down the backstairs while my uncle and aunt were having dinner. I walked and walked. I never have known where I went. It got dark and cold, but I kept on walking. And at last I came to a place down around the docks, where the boats come in. I was so cold and tired I started to cry, and some men found me. They took me to the police station, and the men there were so good. They gave me some sandwiches and milk, and then the man at the desk asked me all those questions—

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about who I was and why I ran away. I thought they would let me stay there, but when they found out my aunt didn't beat me or starve me they said I'd have to go back to her. The man at the desk told me that children had to stay with their own people, and that I mustn't be so silly again. So I knew running away wasn't any use, and I've never tried since. They'd just make me go back." And Mary Jane looked more hopeless than ever.

"Well, that was a silly thing to do," Frances commented. "Running away without having any place to go, I mean. And of course if you were only nine—! You could do it now, though. You're older, and you know how to work. You could get a job somewhere, and—"

"Francie!" Kathleen interrupted her. "Don't go putting such ideas in her head. Fourteen or nine, it wouldn't make a bit of difference. That policeman was perfectly right; girls do have to stay with their people until they're of age, unless they're being so cruelly treated the law will do something about it. And that's not the case with Mary Jane. She'll just have to stay with her aunt and uncle until she's eighteen, and make the best of it."

"She has to stay with her family, but must it be the Mortimers?" Frances asked suddenly. "I mean—Mary Jane, haven't you any other

relatives? Isn't there someone who'd take you in, if you're so unhappy here?"

The girl shook her head. "My aunt has always said I was alone in the world, and that I'd have to depend on charity if it weren't for her."

"But there might be someone," Frances insisted. "You must have some cousins, or something. Everyone has. Doesn't your aunt ever have any relatives come to see her?"

"Never. Nor my uncle either. They have lots of visitors, of course, but none of them are relatives. They're mostly business friends of my uncle's, and their wives. They never pay any attention to me, of course. They probably think I'm just one of the maids."

"But when you were little?" Frances would not give up. "Oh, try to remember, Mary Jane, it's *important*! Didn't anyone ever come to the house who said, 'So this is little Mary Jane! My, how big she's getting!' You know, the way cousins and aunts do? Can't you remember someone like that?"

"No, I can't. Oh—" Mary Jane broke off suddenly. "There was the Man with the Beard. I'm sure he wasn't a relative, though."

"Well, what about him? Tell us!" Frances demanded.

"All right, but I don't see what good it will

do," Mary Jane answered slowly. "It's the very earliest thing I can remember, and I don't know why it has stuck in my mind for so long.

"I couldn't have been more than three, I'm sure. We were living in a small apartment in New York, one that only had one bedroom, so that I had to sleep in a crib in one corner of it. We moved several times after that, and all I can remember of this first place is the bedroom.

"The living-room was next door, and I woke quite suddenly in the middle of the night—at least it seemed that late to me—to hear voices in the next room. My uncle's, and a stranger's. My aunt must have been out. They rumbled on and on, and I couldn't go to sleep again because of the noise, although I didn't understand a word they were saying.

"Then the voices grew louder, and I saw my uncle coming in the bedroom door, followed by a very fat old man with a big bushy white beard. My uncle turned on the light, and I could see the man quite plainly before I shut my eyes. I pretended to be asleep, for I knew I'd be scolded for being awake at that time of night. But when I saw they weren't paying any attention to me, I opened my eyes again and peeped."

"Oh, go on," Frances urged, as Mary Jane hesitated for a minute. "What did they do?"

“They went over to my uncle’s desk by the window,” she resumed. “I don’t know why it was kept in the bedroom, but it was. And he took a small leather bag, rather like a tobacco pouch I think now, from one of the desk drawers, and brought it over to the table under the light. He loosened the drawstring and dumped everything in it on the table. And the most beautiful jewels came out of that bag. Rings, and bracelets, and a long string of glittering beads that I am sure must have been diamonds, though I didn’t know the word then.”

“Oh, this is exciting!” Frances exclaimed. “Do you think—but I mustn’t interrupt. What did they do with them?”

“The Man with the Beard picked them up and looked at them one by one. He had a funny glass, the kind jewelers use, screwed into his eye. And they talked a lot, all about money. I couldn’t understand very well. At last they picked up the necklace, and then they argued a long time. Finally I heard him say quite distinctly, ‘Well, take it or leave it. That’s my best offer.’ So my uncle said, ‘All right. But it is robbery.’ And the man put the necklace in his pocket and pulled out a wallet and gave my uncle a lot of bills. They put the other jewels back in the bag, and put the bag back in the desk. I shut my eyes tight

then, for they had to pass my crib to get to the door. And—and then—”

Mary Jane shivered. “They stopped by the crib, and the strange man bent over me, so low that I could feel his prickly beard brush my face. I was afraid even to breathe. Then he straightened up again, and said with a kind of laugh, ‘So this is the child! What are you planning to do with the little monkey? I can find you an orphanage where no questions will be asked.’

“You can guess how that frightened me, and I remember how relieved I was when my uncle answered. ‘No, thanks, we’re keeping her. A girl can always make herself useful around the house, and my wife has a fancy to be served by one of that family. You can appreciate that.’ They both laughed then, and my uncle turned out the light and they went away.”

She stopped, and Frances’ face showed her disappointment. “But is that all? Because it doesn’t tell me a thing.”

“I didn’t suppose it would,” Mary Jane answered. “I only told you because you asked if any of my uncle’s visitors had ever taken any notice of me. That was the only time. I never saw the Man with the Beard again, and I have no idea who he was.”

“But he did know something about you,”

Kathleen, who had been listening silently, put in. "He knew what your uncle meant by 'that family,' meaning yours. By the way, that was an odd thing to say. Wouldn't it be his family, too, your uncle's, I mean?"

Mary Jane looked bewildered. "I never thought of that. It does seem odd, doesn't it?"

"Maybe the relationship is on your aunt's side," Kathleen went on. "But still—'she has a fancy to be served by one of *that* family—' it's a queer way to put it if he meant *her* family. You're sure that's what he said, Mary Jane? It's so long ago, maybe you've mixed it up."

"No, those were exactly the words," she said positively. "I don't know why I've remembered them so clearly, but I have. I'm certain of them."

"Well, then, let's see," Kathleen thought hard. "'That family—' not 'her family' or 'my family.' Just what is the relationship between you and the Mortimers, Mary Jane? Was your aunt a sister of your father or mother? Or was your uncle a brother?"

Mary Jane shook her head helplessly. "They've never told me *anything*! But I don't see how they could either of them speak of a brother or sister as they always speak of my parents."

"I know, you told us," Kathleen interposed hastily. "It's a mysterious business, any way you

look at it. Forgive me for asking, but is it absolutely certain that your parents are dead?"

"Oh, yes, that's the only thing I *am* certain of," Mary Jane answered forlornly. "I mean, it's the only thing my aunt has told me definitely. They died when I was a baby. All the rest is just dark hints about how wicked they were, and how much I owe to her charity. That's all I know about myself, and all I'll ever find out from her."

"Well, I don't think it's enough!" Frances spoke with sudden violence. "I've kept my thoughts about your relatives to myself, Mary Jane, but I'll just *burst* if I don't come out with it sometime! It's all very well to tell you to be grateful, but for what? No, I won't hush, Kathleen! Mary Jane does a servant's work in this house, and she doesn't even get a servant's wages. Is that anything to be grateful for? And on top of it all, this cruel talk about her dead parents. Wicked? Why, if you want to know, I don't believe anyone *could* be as wicked as those Mortimers! And I'd like to tell them so."

"Francie, stop!" Kathleen begged. "I'm ashamed of her, Mary Jane. She—"

"Oh, it's all right," Mary Jane answered seriously. "You just don't understand, Francie. I don't mind the work, and I don't mind the scoldings, really, I don't. They're nothing. But

the one thing that does make me unhappy is this mystery about my parents. If I could only know! When we talked about it that day in the kitchen you were such a comfort, Kathie. Do you remember what you said? That maybe my parents weren't really bad, and that it was all right for me to think of them kindly. I've been so much happier since then, that I've almost persuaded myself that I'm like other girls. But now, my aunt is coming back, and it will all begin over again. I won't have you two any more, and she will always be here, talking, talking, talking, and I'll have no way of answering her, for I don't *know!*"

CHAPTER VIII

THE OLD DESK'S SECRET

MARY JANE'S outburst dismayed Kathleen and Frances more than they liked to show. It seemed to bring the domineering aunt very near. Mrs. Mortimer was real again, in spite of the way they had successfully ignored the thought of her for many happy days. Frances, with her passion for direct action, spoke impetuously.

"We'll have to do something about it, Mary Jane, that's all!" she declared. "After all, mysteries *can* be solved, if you're clever enough. We may not be very clever, but we can make up for it by trying hard, and by never giving up until we succeed. You *can* know, and you shall! I'm going to find out who you are, and who your parents were, and what this mystery is all about. I am, if it takes the rest of my life!"

Mary Jane's smile was misty. "Bless you, Francie, I know you would if you could. But it's all so hopeless."

"Nothing's hopeless," Frances answered firmly. "Wait and see! I'm going to do it, I tell you! Now listen. What we need, first of all, is a clue.

Something to start with. Think hard, both of you. What could it be?"

Obediently the other two wrinkled their brows in silence for a minute. Then Kathleen ventured a suggestion.

"Mightn't there be a document of some sort? Old letters, or—or Mary Jane's birth certificate, or something like that?"

Frances brightened at once. "Good for you, Sis! How about it, Mary Jane? Suppose we burglarize your uncle's desk. It's in the library downstairs, isn't it? Don't look so scandalized, Kathie. Who minds a little prying in a good cause? I'm sure I don't."

"I don't either, in *this* cause," Mary Jane admitted. "But it's no use. I've dusted and straightened that desk lots of times, and there's nothing in it that I haven't seen. Nothing that would be of any help. He might have something at his office, but I don't know."

"Um, that's no good, then. Well, we'll just have to think of something else. If he lets you dust his desk there are no secrets in it. That's certain! Oh, by the way, is the bag of jewels still in the drawer?"

"Jewels? Oh, you mean the ones I saw that night? No, they aren't in his desk now. I don't know what he did with them. Maybe the Man

with the Beard came back later and bought the rest of them. But I never heard anything about it. It wasn't the library desk he kept them in, though, it was an old rolltop one, much too shabby for this house. I expect it's here in the attic somewhere. My aunt never can bear to throw anything away, even when it's worn out."

"But there's our clue!" Frances exclaimed. "The old desk he had when you were a baby! Why, that would be the very likeliest place to look for papers about you. Are you sure it's up here? Let's look it over. Come on, Kathleen, and help."

But Kathleen sat still on the old velvet sofa. "There's nothing in that, Kitten. If Mr. Mortimer doesn't want Mary Jane to know about herself, he certainly wouldn't leave any important papers around in the attic where she sleeps. That would be silly."

"Oh, you don't know!" Frances answered impatiently. "He'd never expect her to look for them. Besides, they could be in a locked drawer. Or a secret one. That's the way it happens in stories! Anyway, it can't do any harm to look. We've got to start somewhere, and it might as well be there."

"All right, honey." Kathleen stood up. "Come on, Mary Jane, show us. Where is the desk?"

"I don't really know." Their hostess led the way, out of the cleared space she called her room, and into the jungle of trunks and old furniture. "I'm sure it was brought up here when we moved into this house, but I don't remember seeing it since. It must be behind some of these packing cases. They're very, very dusty," she warned.

They were indeed! The single electric bulb only lighted this part of the attic dimly, and the three girls were grimy and disheveled, and very red and breathless from tugging aside the heavy boxes, before their search was rewarded.

The desk, which had been a handsome one of old-fashioned mahogany, looked shabby and forlorn when they finally unearthed it behind a tangle of broken chairs and straw-filled barrels. They pushed enough of these out of the way to get at the drawers, and it was with a thrill of excitement that the older girls watched Frances pull out the top one.

"Of all things on earth—curtains!" she exclaimed in disgust, as her eyes fell upon a mass of crumpled lace.

Mary Jane was peering over her shoulder. "They're the ones we had in the last New York apartment. None of them would fit the windows here."

There were three deep drawers, extending to

the floor. Frances searched them rapidly, her spirits sinking lower every minute. The drawers were stuffed to the bursting point with lace curtains—and nothing else.

“Well, that’s that,” she sighed at last. “Now for the pigeon holes, and the little drawers on top.”

These yielded a few rubber bands, a rusty pen point, a half dozen paper clips, and a circular advertising the Harvard Classics. Also a great deal of dust, but nothing else.

Frances looked at her sister and smiled ruefully. “Go on, say it, ‘I told you so.’ ”

“I wasn’t going to say it, dear. I’m as disappointed as you are. I was afraid to believe it, but I did hope that we might find something, even if it were only a scrap of paper. How about your secret drawer? Are there any signs of one?”

“I can’t see any. Help me look, both of you. Maybe I’ve missed something.”

The desk was without carving of any kind. There were no knobs to press, nor were there any traces of hidden springs. The girls pulled the larger drawers out again, and carefully went through them. Mary Jane said very little, but the mingled hope and despair on her sensitive face showed what the search meant to her. As Kathleen had said, it did not seem probable that

her uncle would leave anything of importance in this unguarded desk, but she could not help hoping. Her disappointment was very real as the second search proved as fruitless as the first. She looked as though she might cry.

In her thoroughness, Frances had removed all the curtains this time. She was stuffing them back without much regard for orderliness and consequently, filled the bottom drawer too full. When she tried to close it, it stuck and resisted her efforts. She pushed hard, but she could not make it go in.

"Oh, bother!" she exclaimed, and gave an impatient jerk forward. The whole drawer tumbled out, cracking her painfully on the shins. "You would do that!" she addressed it bitterly, bending to remove some of the curtains.

Even with its lessened load, the obstinate drawer still refused to slide all the way back into its groove.

"Here, let me try," her sister offered. Frances moved aside. Kathleen pushed with all her strength, but still it did not close.

"There's something back there," Kathleen said. "We'll have to take the drawer out again and see what it is."

"Oh, don't bother," Mary Jane interposed. "It doesn't matter whether the drawer is closed

or not. Oh! You don't think it might be—whatever we're looking for?"

"The Clue?" Frances repeated Mary Jane's unspoken question solemnly. "Of course it might be. The question is, is it?"

Kathleen, saying nothing, had taken the drawer out again, and now Frances was on her knees, with her arm plunged far back into the dusty tunnel.

"Got it!" she announced. "It must have been jammed flat against the back, and when the drawer came out the first time it fell in a thick wad. It's—I think it's—"

She drew something out and held it up to the dim light. Mary Jane looked at it carefully.

"Oh, it is! It's the jewel bag!"

CHAPTER IX

AN ANGEL LADY

It was dingy and dusty, and disappointingly flat, but it was a tobacco pouch. And Frances was not to be discouraged. Her search had yielded something, anyway, and who could tell but that it might prove to be the clue they needed so badly?

She fumbled impatiently with the drawstring which secured the bag at the top. "It's in a knot, Sis. Here, you try it. I'm all thumbs."

"I'll have to have some light." Kathleen carried the bag over to Mary Jane's bed and perched upon it, as Mary Jane and Frances watched, one on either side of her.

The knots were stubborn. While Kathleen struggled with them, Frances pinched the flabby sides. "There's something in it!" she cried, her voice almost trembling with excitement. "But not jewels, Mary Jane, it's flat and hard. Do you remember anything like that?"

"No, I don't. My uncle just dumped everything out at once, you know, and I couldn't see

very plainly. This may not even be the same bag, though it does look like it."

"Of course it's the bag!" Frances insisted. "Oh, get the scissors, Sis! Those knots are never coming loose, and this suspense is terrible."

With her embroidery scissors, Kathleen snipped off the knots. She picked up the bag and turned it over, shaking its contents onto the white counterpane.

A single object lay revealed. It was a small flat leather case with broken hinges, and it looked as though it had been scratched and cut with a sharp knife. As Kathleen opened it, the girls saw that shreds of faded blue satin clung to one of the inner sides. But the other side contained the surprise!

"Why, it's a miniature!" Frances exclaimed. "And isn't she sweet! But look! What have they done to her?"

It was a tiny head-and-shoulders portrait, painted on ivory. Above a cloud of misty white tulle, a young woman's face, crowned with high-piled golden hair, smiled out at them. It had been a lovely picture, but now it was deeply scarred and scratched, and the golden prongs which held its frame in place were twisted and broken.

"The frame must have been set with precious

stones," Kathleen surmised. "Someone has pried them out with a knife, someone who didn't care in the least what he did to the poor lady. Every time the knife slipped, it plowed right across her face. What a shame!"

"This was *the* jewel bag then!" Frances interrupted. "It's perfectly plain. Mr. Mortimer sold them all, even the stones from this frame. And when he'd ruined the picture, *he* wouldn't care about that! He just stuck it back in the bag and left it here. But maybe, maybe this poor scratched picture is going to help us more than the jewels themselves would have done. Maybe it's the *clue*!"

Kathleen shook her head. "What we're looking for is a clue to Mary Jane's family, honey. How could Mr. Mortimer's jewels help us to do that?"

"Well—well— Maybe they aren't Mr. Mortimer's jewels! Maybe they really belonged to Mary Jane, and he took them and sold them and kept the money for himself. It would be just like him!"

"Dear, this isn't a moving picture, or a story in a book," Kathleen said gently. "That sort of thing doesn't happen in real life, you know. We're trying to get at the truth, and wild, ro-

mantic guesses aren't going to help. If we could only uncover some facts!"

"Oh, *facts!*" Frances turned in disgust to Mary Jane. She was studying the miniature earnestly, deaf to all that went on about her. She looked up as Frances put an arm about her shoulder.

"Isn't she beautiful? See, she's smiling right at us—or would be, if that cruel scratch weren't across her lips. It's a sunny, happy face, don't you think? As if she loved the whole world, and was perfectly sure that the whole world loved her back. I do wonder who she was?"

"And there goes my last hope!" Frances exclaimed. "I thought you might at least have seen her some time, Mary Jane. Are you sure you don't recognize her?"

Mary Jane sighed. "Quite sure. I should have remembered if I'd ever seen a face like that, all sweetness and heavenly kindness. She looks more an angel than any human woman I've ever seen."

"She does, doesn't she?" Frances took the portrait from Mary Jane's hand and studied it again. "It's the white gown and all that golden hair like an aureole around her face I guess. But even without anything, it's an angelic face. I wonder—"

"What is the meaning of this?"

The interruption was so sudden and so sharp that the three girls sprang to their feet, trembling as though they had been caught in a crime. Mary Jane's aunt had returned.

She was a stout, redfaced woman, with coarse black hair and an illtempered mouth. Behind her stood her husband. Both were in traveling clothes, and Mrs. Mortimer had not even removed her hat.

She advanced into the room, puffing a little from the exertion of climbing the stairs to Mary Jane's room. Frances, stealing a glance at Mary Jane, saw that she was shaking with nervousness. It was with difficulty that Mary Jane managed to say, "How do you do, aunt. I didn't expect you until the night train."

"I can see that," Mrs. Mortimer answered grimly. "And about time I did get here, I must say! I find that good-for-nothing cook in the kitchen in a *rocking chair*, idling away the afternoon with a magazine! And she has the impudence to tell me that you are 'entertaining the young ladies' in your room! I'd like to know who gave you leave to 'entertain' in my house? Who do you think you are, anyway? And who is this riffraff you've sneaked in behind my back?"

Mary Jane's face was scarlet, but she answered

bravely, "These are my friends, Kathleen and Frances Forrester, aunt. They live next door."

Mrs. Mortimer's withering gaze swept the sisters, and then her harsh voice went on.

"Indeed! And since when have you been allowed to take up with the neighbors' kids? Don't you know any better? Haven't I told you time and again I wouldn't have you running the streets, wasting your time? Haven't you any work to do, then? 'Friends!' "

She turned to her husband. "Did you ever hear of such a thing? Taking up with common trash from the village, the minute my back is turned. See, it's just like I've always said. There's not a grain of gratitude in the girl. She's a lazy, lying, selfish hussy, like her mother before her!"

Mr. Mortimer twirled his little moustache and glared at poor Mary Jane. "I quite agree with you, my dear," he answered smoothly.

"He'd better!" Frances whispered to herself. It was quite plain who really ruled the Mortimer household.

Mrs. Mortimer turned to Mary Jane again, and a long tirade began. Kathleen caught the agonized plea in Mary Jane's eyes, and she pinched her sister. "Let's go," she whispered. "We're only making it worse for Mary Jane,

and dear auntie's likely to throw us out bodily if we stay much longer."

As unobtrusively as possible, they moved toward the door, and the Mortimers paid no attention to them. As soon as they were down the attic stairs, both girls ran as fast as they could.

Safe on their own grounds, they stopped to look at each other. They were furious, on their own account and Mary Jane's, but the encounter had had its humorous side.

"Riffraff!" Kathleen gasped.

"Common village trash!" Frances retorted.

They sank down on to the veranda steps, their arms around each other's shoulders, and rocked with helpless laughter.

"It isn't funny for Mary Jane, though," Kathleen said presently, as she dried her eyes. "The poor child! She told us how it would be, but I simply couldn't believe her. I didn't think anyone could be like that, except a witch in a fairy tale."

"Or a dragon! If we hadn't run we'd have been covered with fiery lava by now. I could feel it coming on under that baleful glare. Oh, Kathie, look what I've got! I had the Angel Lady in my hand when Mrs. Mortimer came in and startled us, and I've carried her off."

She opened her hand to show the little leather case. "I didn't mean to, Mrs. Mortimer drove everything out of my head when she started to scold Mary Jane. Ought I to take it right back?"

"You wouldn't stick your head into the lion's den again, I hope! Can't you ever learn your place—riffraff? Take care of it for Mary Jane, honey, till you find a chance to give it to her. She liked it, and it may really be hers. Anyway, *they* don't want it, and they certainly haven't any right to pictures of Angel Ladies."

"I quite agree with you, my dear," Frances answered solemnly.

CHAPTER X

MR. MAZAROFF LISTENS

A WEEK went by, and nothing happened. From the house next door the sound of Mrs. Mortimer's voice came frequently, always scolding and demanding. Once or twice Frances glimpsed Mary Jane's pale face peering wistfully from a window. A hurried wave of the hand was all the two friends dared to offer on these occasions. No new servants had appeared, and the sisters could guess that the girl's time was fully occupied.

At first Kathleen and Frances had had countless plans for seeing Mary Jane again. They had felt certain that an opportunity would arise the first time Mrs. Mortimer was away from the house.

To their surprise, however, they found that "the unspeakable aunt," as Frances called her, seemed to have given up her trips to the city. As far as they could tell, she never left the house. Mr. Mortimer, too, spent much of his time at home. They could often see him, as he lounged on his veranda, yawning over his newspapers.

And the cruel, sly expression never left his grayish face. Occasionally he raised his voice in a sharp command to Mary Jane, who immediately appeared with a tall glass containing a cold drink. The big car, which had so impressed the other residents of Medhurst, stood idle in the garage. There were no more afternoon parties, and no callers. And not only Mary Jane, but also Delia and Mr. Mortimer seemed to be subjected to the sharp edge of Mrs. Mortimer's tongue as the days went by.

"What do you suppose has happened to the Mortimers?" Frances asked her sister one afternoon.

The two girls were alone in the house except for Mr. Mazaroff, who was taking a nap in his room. It was Helga's afternoon out, and Mother had gone into town to join Daddy for a matinee. The girls were in the kitchen, leisurely shelling peas for the dinner they had undertaken to prepare.

"I can't imagine," Kathleen answered. "They surely can't be staying home just to guard Mary Jane. They'd never give up their own pleasure for that. And I can't see any other reason for it. I don't believe that Mr. Mortimer even goes to his office these days. It's beyond me!"

"He sits out on his porch with a face like a

thundercloud, too," Frances contributed. "And Mrs. Mortimer rages all the time. I do feel so sorry for Mary Jane. And for Delia, too. It can't be much fun working for people like that. It's funny that they've never hired any other servants since they came back from New York. I don't see how poor crippled Delia can do all the work, even with Mary Jane to help her. Mrs. Mortimer is much too grand to lift a finger, of course. Why do you suppose she doesn't hire some more help?"

"I'm beyond supposing anything about that woman. Her actions are too hopelessly mysterious. Oh, here's Mr. Mazaroff!"

The tall, gaunt Russian stood hesitating in the doorway. "I am sorry to disturb you, young ladies. I thought I might make myself a cup of tea. Helga is kind enough to allow it when she is here."

"Oh, let me do it, Mr. Mazaroff!" Frances got up quickly. "Please take this chair, and I'll have it ready in a second. No, of course it isn't any trouble! I love making tea, and Mother says I'm very good at it."

"Perhaps Mr. Mazaroff would rather have you bring it to him on the veranda, Francie," Kathleen interposed. "The kitchen—it's hardly—"

"Your kitchen is most pleasant," their guest

answered, seating himself at the shining white table. "I have known far worse quarters."

The girls stared at him in amazement. It was the first time he had referred to his unhappy past in their presence. With her usual impetuosity, Frances grasped at the opening.

"You must have had some exciting adventures, Mr. Mazaroff. Daddy said we weren't to bother you with questions, but I'm dying of curiosity. Can't you tell us some of the thrilling things that happened to you?"

A shadow of pain fell upon the weary face. "I am afraid my experiences were hardly 'thrilling' in your sense of the word, Miss Frances. It is a grim, unhappy story which you would not enjoy hearing."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Frances said instantly. "Please forgive me, Mr. Mazaroff. Kathie here will tell you I have no more tact than an elephant! I'm always putting my foot into things. Just forget that I spoke, won't you?"

"But indeed I am not offended, Miss Frances," he said gently. "You have been most kind and gracious to a cantankerous invalid, and I fear I must have tried the patience of all of you."

"Oh, no!" and "Not a bit!" the girls answered in one breath. Frances brought him a cup of steaming fragrant tea and sat down to the peas

again. There was an awkward little silence, and Kathleen cast about in her mind for a way to break it.

"We were gossiping about our neighbors when you came in, Mr. Mazaroff," she ventured presently, "the people in the big house next door. We think they're rather a mysterious family."

"That would be the family of the little girl who lunched with us one day? A sweet child, I thought, but strangely sad for one so young. And there is a mystery?"

"Well, we don't know that there is," Kathleen answered, delighted that the conversational corner was safely turned. "Sometimes I think we've imagined too much. Mary Jane is an orphan, living with her uncle and aunt. They are not very kind to her, and they refuse to tell her anything about her parents. That doesn't sound so terribly mysterious, does it? And it's all that we really know."

"Oh, but it isn't at all!" Frances contradicted. "There are all kinds of queer things about that family, Mr. Mazaroff! Why, there was the Man with the Beard, and the jewels, and Mrs. Mortimer's hints that Mary Jane's parents were very wicked, and the way the Mortimers have stopped going out lately, and—and the Angel Lady! Oh, I can't begin to tell you all the queer things!

And if a lot of queer things that people can't—or won't—explain, doesn't mean some kind of a mystery, then what does?"

"It sounds very odd indeed," Boris Mazaroff agreed. "Perhaps you would like to tell me the story? Or would your little friend object?"

"Oh, no, Mary Jane wouldn't mind," Frances answered quickly. "Only we don't want to bother you. It's a long story, and very, very sad."

"It will not bother me, I am sure. Please tell me."

This interest was prompted only by good manners, Frances was sure. Mr. Mazaroff couldn't really care about Mary Jane's pitiful little troubles, when he had so many of his own. But his attitude showed Frances that at least she had not offended him. Then, too, she was beginning to lose her awe of him, and to realize that behind his weary indifference there might be a kind, friendly personality.

Eagerly she plunged into the story of Mary Jane Smith. She tried to be as fair as she could to the Mortimers, but her resentment at their treatment of her friend could not be hidden. Although Mr. Mazaroff had seen Mary Jane only at her happiest, his keen eyes had noted the signs of genuine unhappiness which were fully accounted for by the story Frances told him.

She had described their search for the papers, and their failure to find anything which proved Mary Jane's identity.

"Has it occurred to you," Mr. Mazaroff asked then, "that there must be a public record of your friend's birth? I have always understood that the American health authorities are very strict on that point. Does she know the city of her birth?"

"Yes, I think it's New York," Frances answered. "At least, she said that was the first place she could remember. Do you mean she could go to the City Hall, or wherever it is, in New York, and find out something about herself? We never thought of that."

"It should be possible. Probably a letter to the Health Commissioner there would bring her a copy of the record. Of course, this would contain only a very small amount of information. The date of birth, the parents' names, their residence at that time would be the extent of it."

"It isn't very much, is it?" Frances said doubtfully. "Mary Jane already knows her birth date, and that her parents were named Smith. Discovering where they had lived when she was born wouldn't help much, unless she could go there and question the neighbors. I don't suppose that would be any use, after all these years, and

anyway, she can't do it. Her aunt would never let her. You see, Mr. Mazaroff," Frances went on earnestly, "what Mary Jane really wants, more than anything in the world, is to know something definite about her parents. It's this living under a dark cloud of doubt that she can't endure. She feels that she could stand anything, no matter how bad it was, if she could only *know!*"

"I can understand that," Boris Mazaroff answered somberly. "Uncertainty can be, I think, a fiercer torture than the human soul was meant to bear. However, I have interrupted your story. You found nothing at all in your search of the desk?"

"Well, almost nothing. When we had quite given up, we accidentally found a small leather pouch wedged between the drawers. While it is like the bag Mary Jane had seen with the jewels in it, she can't be sure that it is the very same one. But I just know it is."

"It was empty, of course?"

"Not quite. There was a little leather case in it which contained a picture. The frame must have been set with precious stones, we think, but someone had pried all of them out. Both the picture and the case were terribly scratched and battered, and the person who took the stones

out probably didn't think the rest of it worth bothering with. So he just stuck it back into the bag, poked it away in the drawer, and forgot all about it."

"And you think that this 'he' was the uncle—Mortimer—is that the name?"

"Yes. He's just the sort of man who would ruin a lovely thing like that picture without caring a bit, as long as he got his greedy hands on the gems. He's a *horrid* man, Mr. Mazaroff! Little and sly and mean looking, and completely under the thumb of his dreadful wife. And the picture—it's the sweetest face, Mr. Mazaroff! It's a lady, very young, and, as poor Mary Jane says, 'with the face of an angel.' Of course it's simply ruined by those deep scratches, but—Wait! Shall I get it? It's upstairs in my workbasket. I was looking at it just as Mrs. Mortimer found us that day, and she made such a scene that Sis and I just faded out as best we could. When we got home I found I'd carried off the picture. Shall I get it, Mr. Mazaroff?"

"Oh, honey, I don't think Mr. Mazaroff cares about seeing it," Kathleen put in anxiously. "You've tired him enough as it is. He can't want any more of your chatter today."

"But indeed I am interested, Miss Kathleen." There was more than mere politeness in the Rus-

sian's voice. "It is a touching story, that of your forlorn little friend. I fear that my own misfortunes have made me selfish. It is well I should be made to realize that one does not suffer alone in this cruel world, there are always others, more innocent, less deserving of Fate's blows. Yet to them, too, must come the bitter cup of sorrow. What a world!"

His voice was so sad and tired that the girls fidgeted uncomfortably. To them, wrapped round in love and security, the world was a bright, happy one. Yet to Mary Jane and to Mr. Mazaroff—Frances felt her throat tightening, and her hand crept into Kathleen's for comfort.

"We try to do what we can for everyone who is unhappy, Mr. Mazaroff," came Kathleen's quiet voice. "Often it isn't much. But surely, if *everybody* tries, it will be a better world some day?"

His gloomy face lightened. "I think it will, Miss Kathleen. It is *your* world now, the world of youth. You must do a better job with it than we older ones did. Perhaps—yes, we must believe that you will. Especially if what you have just said is the creed of your generation, my dear. It is a very beautiful one!"

Kathleen flushed. "I wasn't trying to speak

for my generation, Mr. Mazaroff. It's just the way Francie and I feel about things. But I think most people feel that way. I know lots and lots of girls, and Mary Jane is the first one I've ever known who was actually mistreated at home. I can't believe that there are many people like the Mortimers."

"Let us hope that, if there are, you never encounter them, my dear." His unexpected smile was very warm, and Kathleen wondered how she could ever have thought him aloof and indifferent. "Oh, but he's *nice*," she thought swiftly, "I'm never going to be afraid of him any more!"

"Well, there are *two* Mortimers, and that's enough for me," Frances brought the conversation back to practical matters. "And by hook or crook, I'm going to get Mary Jane away from them or die trying. *Do* you want to see the picture, Mr. Mazaroff? Maybe it'll give you some idea that we haven't thought of."

"By all means, Miss Frances. I should be happy to help, if I can."

"That's fine. I'll get it right now."

CHAPTER XI

DELIA SPEAKS HER MIND

FRANCES was halfway across the room on her way upstairs, when there was a terrific banging upon the kitchen door. It was not locked, and before Mr. Mazaroff or the girls could move, the handle turned, and the door opened wide. They stared in amazement at a sturdy old figure in a plaid coat, her hat slightly askew, her gnarled hands clutching a bulging suitcase.

“Delia! For heaven’s sake!” Kathleen was first to recover. “Do come in. Has something happened to Mary Jane? Is anything wrong?”

“Is anything right in that house?” The Irish-woman closed the door and sank into the chair Kathleen pushed forward. “No, there’s no harm come to the little one. At least, no more than always, poor darlin’. She’s givin’ her precious aunt a Sham Poo in the bathroom, and gettin’ her poor purty ears boxed most like for darin’ to splash soap into her leddyship’s eyes. And don’t I wish *I* had the chanst to Sham Poo her once. I’d fill her ugly mouth with the soap, that I would!”

"Me too!" Frances agreed heartily. She had joined the others, her errand temporarily forgotten.

Delia looked about, and her suspicious gaze questioned the silent Russian.

"This is Mr. Mazaroff, our guest, Delia," Kathleen said. "We've just been telling him all about Mary Jane, so if you have any message from her you needn't mind his hearing."

"It's no message. It's just somethin' I thought you ought to know, miss, you and your sister bein' the only friends the little one has on earth. You may say it's none of my business, and indeed it's not, and never have I been one to carry tales of my employers, as anyone will tell you. But—I'm leavin' that house, Miss Kathleen. I won't be worryin' you with my grievances, but it's the truth that put up with that woman's bossin' any longer I couldn't, and I was goin' anyway if she hadn't said the word first! I won't try to hide from you that we had words this mornin', when she come into me kitchen findin' fault. 'Then you can go,' she says. And, 'The sooner the better, ma'am,' I says. And I'm on me way to the station now."

"Oh, Delia, I'm sorry!" Kathleen exclaimed. "Have you found another place?"

"Sure and I have. There's a lady in the city

where me sister is second gurrel that's been at me to come to her for these many weeks. Don't you be vexin' your kind heart over me, miss. It's the little one I'm worryin' over. Now that I'm gone, she'll be left alone in that house with them two—hyenas! Yes, that's the name for them. Hyenas they are, and it's me that says it. The way they put upon that poor child, and her so patient and sweet and willin'—it fair makes me blood boil!"

"We all agree with you, Delia," Kathleen answered, with a straight face. "But you were going to tell us—"

"And tell you I will!" Delia's indignation faded into solemnity. "Miss Kathleen, them Mortimers is dead broke. And what's worse, he's been spendin' money that don't belong to him. And what's goin' to be the end of it, heaven only knows!"

"Why, Delia, you can't mean that!" Frances exclaimed. "Everybody knows Mr. Mortimer is the richest man in Medhurst."

"Everybody thinks so, you mean. What do they know about him? He comes out here, buys a big house, makes a big splash but it's all a bluff! I misdoubt if he ever did have as much money as he looked to have. But anyhow, it's gone now. That business of his, that stock-brokerin' or what-

ever you call it, is a mighty funny business, Miss Frances. Not like a store or a factory. It's more of a gamblin' business, the way he runs it. But of course it's not my place to say anything about that, and maybe I don't know the rights of it anyhow. But this I do know. That Mortimer has been what you call speculatin' till he's lost every cent of his own. And thinkin' to get it back, he's been throwin' good money after bad. And the good money, Miss Kathleen, was what his customers trusted him to buy stocks with for them!"

"But Delia, that's a serious thing to say!" Kathleen exclaimed. "Are you sure about it?"

"I'm sure, all right, Miss Kathleen. I don't know all the ins and outs of it, but that's the way it is. And I didn't listen at keyholes to find out, if that's what you're thinkin'. Ever since the two of 'em come back from that New York trip it's all that's been heard in the house. They don't pay no attention to me, no more than if I was the kitchen stove, but I got ears and eyes. Up till yesterday he was still hopin' to get somethin' back, but he come home last night and told her the market had gone down again, and he was wiped out."

"Well, what are we supposed to do?" Frances interrupted impatiently. "I'm not going to waste any sympathy on Mr. Mortimer. I hope he starves!"

"Hush, Kitten," Kathleen laid a hand on her arm. "Go on, Delia. You didn't come just to tell us this. You think because the Mortimers have lost their money it will make a difference to Mary Jane?"

"I'll tell you what I think, miss." Delia looked about cautiously and lowered her voice. "They took care of her while they was rich because the madam liked to have somebody to order around. They wasn't any love in it, I'll answer for that. Well, now, he's in a purty bad fix over this money he took. It'll mean prison if he can't put it back. And how can he when he ain't got it? They're fixin' to skip before they're found out, that's what! Last night when I served dinner they was talkin' about Canada. They stopped every time I come in the room, but I heard the word over and over. And after dinner they was in the library with their heads together over automobile maps. I know! They're plannin' to get out of the country before his customers find out he's robbed 'em, the crook! And this is what I'm gettin' at. They've no decent affection for Mary Jane. She'd be a nuisance and a bother on a trip like that, maybe give 'em away without meanin' to. Do you think they're goin' to burden themselves with her? *I don't!*"

"You think that they are planning to abandon the child?" It was Boris Mazaroff's quiet voice.

"That's what I'm afraid of, sir. Like I've seen families do with a cat or a dog when they got ready to move, and didn't want to be bothered with the animal any more. Them Mortimers has no more feelin' for their own flesh and blood than if she was a cat, and they'd go off and leave her to starve just as gay as you please if the notion took 'em. And what'll become of poor little Mary Jane then?"

"Why, she'll come here, of course!" Frances exclaimed. "Oh, I'm so glad you told us, Delia! If the Mortimers do run away and leave her, she can come right over and live with us. How perfectly lovely! Do you think they'll go soon? It'll be the very nicest thing that could happen. Don't worry about her a bit, Delia. She'll have a perfectly good home at our house."

"Sure and that's mighty sweet of you, Miss Francie," Delia said warmly. "And lucky the little one is to have such a friend. But it'll bear thinkin' over." She shook her head doubtfully. "Your father and mother are kind people, I know, but a half-grown girl is different from a stray kitten, dearie. I misdoubt they'll want the responsibility, to say nothin' of the expense."

"Why, of course they'll want her!" Frances began indignantly, but then stopped at a warning glance from Kathleen.

After all, the girls knew that they had no right to assume that their parents would consent to such an undertaking.

As though he had noticed nothing, Boris Mazaroff spoke. "You need not worry about the young girl, Mrs. Delia. If her relatives do abandon her, as you suspect they are planning to do, I'll make myself responsible for her welfare."

"*You!* But Mr. Mazaroff—" Kathleen stammered so badly that she could not go on.

"Your father has many responsibilities, Miss Kathleen," the quiet voice continued. "I have none. I am a lonely man, with no living creature to claim my protection. It will give me pleasure to provide for your little friend, should the need arise."

"Well, heaven bless you for a noblehearted gentleman!" Delia exclaimed. "And me thinkin' up to now that the Rooshians was no better than cannibals! It's a load off me mind, sir, and I won't deny it. And now— Glory be, will you look at the clock!" She rose hastily and began buttoning her coat.

"Did the Mortimers say when they were going, Delia?" Frances asked.

"Never a word. I think meself it's a matter of raisin' all the money they can first. He took

the silver plate away with him this mornin', and a man called from town to say he'd be out tomorrow to look at the Oriental rugs. The house is mortgaged for more than it's worth, but my guess is they'll turn the best of the furniture into cash, though by rights it ought to go to the poor souls he robbed. Well, thank you again, sir, and you too, young ladies. Sure, it's a lighter heart I'm takin' away than I brought with me."

As the door closed behind her, they heard Daddy's key turn in the lock. The girls rushed into the front hall, followed more slowly by Mr. Mazaroff.

"Oh, Daddy, Mums, listen!" Frances began breathlessly. "We're late with dinner, but you won't mind just this once. The most *amazing* thing has happened. Mr. Mazaroff is going to adopt Mary Jane!"

CHAPTER XII

CHIVALRY IS NOT DEAD

MARY JANE and her impossible relatives were the chief topic of conversation at the Forrester dinner table that evening. Delia's story was repeated in every detail, and her fears for the girl's welfare were discussed. Kathleen and Frances had already told their mother all that they knew of Mary Jane's unhappy life, but most of it was new to Daddy, who had been absorbed in his business affairs. He listened with mingled indignation and amusement to the "riff-raff" story, which Frances illustrated as she told it with a perfect imitation of Mrs. Mortimer's tones and gestures.

Mr. Forrester was not inclined to take Delia's fears very seriously. "Abandoning a minor child is quite a grave offense in the eyes of the law," he observed. "I can't say that what you tell me has prejudiced me in Mortimer's favor, but it hardly seems possible that he would do a thing like that."

"But Daddy, speculating with other people's money is a grave offense too," Frances pointed

out. "And Mr. Mortimer did do that, Delia says. It seems to me if he's enough of a criminal to do the one thing, he wouldn't stop at the other. Especially when you think of the way they've always treated poor Mary Jane!"

"Do you think we ought to do anything, Hugh?" Mrs. Forrester asked anxiously. "I mean, speak to the police, although it's a horrid thing to do? After all, they are our neighbors, even if we don't like them. But if Mr. Mortimer has broken the law, and is planning to run away—do you think it's our duty to tell?"

Mr. Forrester shook his head. "We couldn't do that, dear. We haven't any basis for our beliefs other than the gossip of a dismissed servant. No officer would make an arrest on that. And if he did, and it developed that Delia had misunderstood the situation, it would be very awkward for us. Oh, I know you believe her, and so do I, at least about the embezzlement. But we can't prove anything. If Mortimer has swindled his clients, it's their responsibility to see that he is arrested, not ours. Besides, I'm not much concerned about that phase of the gentleman's activities. It's the fate of that unfortunate child we're interested in, isn't it?"

"Well, for my part, I hope Delia was right,"

Frances spoke up. "The best thing that could happen to Mary Jane would be for the Mortimers to leave her behind, and never, never show their hateful faces in Medhurst again. I only hope they do it, and quickly, too!"

"That is also my hope." Boris Mazaroff entered the discussion for the first time.

At the quiet words Mr. Forrester put down his coffee cup and turned to his friend. "Boris, you're not taking this mad scheme of the children's seriously? I understand that they stampeded you into offering to look after this waif, if she should be deserted. It was very kind of you to quiet their fears in that way, but of course they must realize that it is utterly impossible."

Frances' eyes turned from her father's face to Mr. Mazaroff's. But surely, surely he had meant what he said this afternoon! He hadn't been just making an empty promise to keep them from worrying? He'd seemed so noble when he had promised to take care of Mary Jane. "Knightly"—that was the word which had popped into Frances' head. But to make a promise without meaning to keep it wasn't knightly. That was just downright *mean*! Frances clenched her hands at her sides. Had she been mistaken about Mr. Mazaroff?

"It was not the young ladies' suggestion, it

was my own." The words came slowly, and Frances listened intently to every one of them. "Would you mind telling me why you consider it impossible?"

"But you must see that for yourself, Boris," Mr. Forrester answered. "This child is nothing to you, has no claim on you whatsoever. She is only—how old is it, girls? Fourteen? That means years of clothing and feeding and educating her until she can be self-sustaining. Why in the world should *you* assume such a burden?"

"You are paying me a generous salary, Mr. Forrester. You have been kind enough to predict for me a prosperous future in the engineering profession. Do you not feel that I am financially able to assume the support of this orphan?"

"Able? Of course you are. That isn't the point. You know nothing whatever about the girl. I'm going to hurt the children's feelings here, I'm afraid, but it can't be helped. Their friend seems a sweet little thing, but she comes of bad stock. We have good reason to believe that the uncle is a thief. We know that the aunt is a bad tempered shrew. The girl, herself, doesn't know who her parents were, and there's a strong possibility, if Mrs. Mortimer's insinuations have any truth in them, that they were

criminals. Surely you'll admit that it would be taking a fearful risk to adopt Mary Jane in the face of these facts?"

The faint smile, which Frances had seen for the first time this afternoon, again flickered over Boris Mazaroff's thin face.

"When you took me, Mr. Forrester, a wretched, starving exile, and gave me a position of authority, did you think of the risk? Did you ask of what stock I came? Did you know, or care, whether or not my uncles were thieves?"

"Oh, but that was different. You were a grown man, and—"

"Pardon, my friend. It was not different. In the hour of my desperate need you extended a helping hand, generously and without question. You preach caution now, but you must forgive me if I follow your practices rather than your preaching. In the case of this needy child, I propose to do, not as you say but as you did. Your generous heart must approve, even though your head may not."

Frances was not quite sure she understood. Did Mr. Mazaroff mean that he was going to keep his promise—or didn't he? She had always admired the dignity and formality of his speech, but today she wished impatiently that he would come to the point immediately. She was infi-

nately relieved when the earnest expression on her father's face relaxed into a smile.

"Well, I had to put it before you the way it would look to the rest of the world," Daddy laughed. "I expect I've lost my daughters' regard forever by doing it, too. Cheer up, Francie. I never for one minute thought that your young friend would turn out a second edition of her aunt. As a matter of fact, Boris, what I've seen of the youngster has impressed me favorably. She's a shy little thing, but if I'm not mistaken there's a wealth of character behind those solemn eyes. And I don't think the girls would have been attracted to her as they have if she hadn't been worth while. If you're really determined to go through with it I shan't put a straw in your way. There, Francie, does that make us friends again?"

She slipped a hand into his. "I was scared at first, but then I remembered that you just couldn't be like that," she said happily. "You were only saying what other people might say, to make sure Mr. Mazaroff realized what he was doing. And it didn't make a bit of difference to him!" She turned beaming eyes on the white-haired Russian.

"Well, I must say I'm relieved too," Mrs. For-

rester observed. "Of course one has to be practical, but really, all that talk about criminal heredity is just ridiculous, when you apply it to Mary Jane Smith. I ought to know something about girls, and you can be quite sure, Mr. Mazaroff, that if you do adopt her, you'll find her as ideal a little daughter as—well, as my two are. And I can't say more than that!"

"Indeed you cannot," Mr. Mazaroff answered, with a friendly glance toward the two sisters. "And now that I have won approval for my plan," he continued, "I confess that I am rather impatient to get on with it. Is there nothing to do but to wait for the aunt and uncle to desert the child?"

"Not a thing," Mr. Forrester said. "We can't go to Mortimer and say 'Look here, old man, we understand you've been embezzling and are about to skip the country. We'll be glad to take your niece off your hands.' That wouldn't do at all."

"And we don't even know that he's going!" Frances mourned. "Wouldn't it be terrible if Delia had been mistaken, and he wasn't a thief at all!"

Mrs. Forrester laughed. "Shocking as your sentiment is, darling, I'm afraid I agree with it. I shall be quite disappointed if Mr. Mortimer

turns out to be an honest man, with no intention of leaving the country or Mary Jane. Did Delia seem positive about it?"

"Oh, she did, Mums," Kathleen assured her. "You know how loudly Mrs. Mortimer talks, and she's one of those people who don't believe that servants are really human beings. Ever since they came back from New York, Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer have been discussing their affairs, and Delia isn't a bit stupid about putting two and two together. She heard all about his speculating and losing his own money, and then trying to win it back by using other people's. And last night he told his wife that his last hope was gone, and that he was wiped out. They talked about Canada, and studied maps—oh, it can't mean anything else. They *must* be planning to run away. Don't you think so, Daddy?"

"Looks like it," Mr. Forrester agreed. "Well, there's not a thing we can do but wait. Keep an eye on their house, girls. The minute you see signs of departure, we'll make ready to receive your young friend. Pity you can't get word to her. She must be rather sick with worry, if she realizes what's going on."

"I don't see how we can. Her aunt will be sure to keep her busy every minute, now that Delia's gone," Kathleen said regretfully. "But we'll

try to think of a way. And we'll make it all up to her afterwards, won't we, Francie?"

Frances did not hear her, for she was busy helping Mr. Mazaroff up from the table. Eagerly she brought him the stick with which he walked to keep his weight off his lame knee. Hero worship shone in her eyes. Her knight had not failed her, and she reproached herself now for the moment's doubt. Never, never would she doubt him again!

CHAPTER XIII

WAITING

WITH all their wonderful plans for Mary Jane ready to be put into effect, the Forrester sisters found it most provoking that life seemed to go on as usual next door. Through the open windows they could hear Mrs. Mortimer's usual faultfinding all day long, and far into the night the rumble of the uncle's voice came across the lawn to them. The houses were not close enough for words to be distinguished, even had the girls cared to play eavesdroppers, but both voices always sounded angry. Mary Jane's soft little contralto was pitched too low to be heard if she were involved in these discussions, but the sisters were fairly certain that her relatives were making her life even more disagreeable than usual.

Kathleen and Frances had vainly tried to devise some way by which they could communicate with their friend. They were sure that Mary Jane's aunt would never allow a telephone call or a letter to pass unquestioned. Mrs. Mortimer never left the house, nor was Mary Jane ever sent

out on errands. All marketing was done by telephone, apparently, and Frances seriously considered the advisability of coaxing the grocer's boy to let her slip a note into his basket. That seemed too risky a plan, however, and at last the girls settled down reluctantly to wait for the Mortimers to make the next move.

To Frances' deep disappointment, Mr. Mazaroﬀ seemed to have lost interest in the affair. The unexpected energy with which he had attacked Mary Jane's problems did not last. As before, he spent long hours in his deck chair. Sometimes he read or dozed a bit, but usually, when the girls saw him, he was just lying there, with his sad eyes looking into space. He had no appetite for the delicious, strengthening dishes Helga prepared for him, and the country air had brought no color to his pale cheeks. The sisters could not help knowing that Daddy was beginning to worry about him.

"I don't like the way things are working at all," they overheard him telling Mother one day. "He was so keen when I took him on, in China, that I let him use up the little bit of strength he had. Then that plunge in the river, and the fever which followed it, just about finished him. I was sure all the time, though, that a good rest and nourishing food would put him

right again. But now I don't know. Seems to me he's getting more listless and weak every day, instead of gaining strength as I had expected."

"What does Dr. Hartley say?"

"That's the perplexing thing about it. Except for his lame knee, Dr. Hartley says he's sound enough, merely nervous and undernourished. Doctor says it's more a lack of will power than anything else. He doesn't seem to want to get well, at least, not enough to make the effort."

"But surely, Hugh, when he knows you're counting on him for the Mexican trip, he ought to try to recover his strength. For your sake, if for no other reason."

"Oh, he's willing enough, poor fellow. You can see that he tries, but something inside of him seems to hold him back. I had quite a talk about it with the doctor. He's on the staff at the Veterans' Hospital, you know. He says it's a common thing among ex-soldiers, this indifference that the men can't overcome, no matter how hard they try. They're not to blame for it either, it's something that the War did to them. A kind of paralysis of the mind that's just as real as a paralyzed spine, and just as hard to treat. 'War neurosis,' Dr. Hartley calls it, and poor Boris has a bad case."

"Of course it wasn't only the War with him," Mother reminded him sympathetically. "There was the Revolution afterward. Yes, losing his friends, his home, everything, and having to flee for his life, I can see how he must have suffered enough to account for anything. But it seems such a pity. A fine, splendid man like that, with everything to live for!"

"If he could just see it that way. But the poor chap has been through so much, suffered so much, that he's given up struggling. Life has been so cruel to him that it doesn't seem worth going on. It's a pity, but there it is."

The conversation ended there, but it left the sisters very thoughtful. The idea that a grown man should not care enough about life to live it was a novel one, and they discussed it endlessly in their talks together. How must it feel to feel like that? And, far more important, what could they *do* about it? For surely something could be—must be—done!

"You know," Frances said thoughtfully one afternoon, "I believe that Mr. Mazaroff needs Mary Jane even more than she needs him."

The sisters were drying their hair on the sunny back porch, and Kathleen shook her tousled brown mop out of her eyes to ask, "How do you figure that out?"

"Well, Daddy says Mr. Mazaroff's whole trouble is that he doesn't care about living. Now if he had the responsibility of an adopted daughter, to earn a living for and look after, he'd have to care, wouldn't he? I mean, he'd have to think, and plan, and get his mind off that old unhappy past of his. Whether he felt like it or not, he'd have to make an effort for her. And he would! The only interest I've ever seen him show in anything was when we told him her story. And later on, when he argued with Daddy about taking her. He was *alive*, then! He sat up straight and his voice was strong. It was like a different man talking. I do honestly think, Sis, that Mary Jane is the very medicine he needs."

"Well, I certainly wish he could have her." Kathleen stirred restlessly, and her eyes strayed to the windows of the Mortimer house. "A decently kind guardian would be good medicine for her, too, a sort she's never had. Do you suppose those awful people are ever going away?"

"Helga says there was a moving van at their door last night," Frances said hopefully. "Very late, around two o'clock, she had gone down to the kitchen to fill her hot water bottle. She heard the motor going and looked out. She says some men came down the steps with a roll of rugs, and later with something that looked like

the grand piano. She went back to bed then, and didn't see any more."

"Well, that sounds encouraging. They're getting rid of the furniture secretly, the more valuable pieces anyway. I suppose if the people he robbed discover their loss they could claim the furniture. It does look as if the Mortimers meant to go quietly away very soon, doesn't it?"

"Oh, they're going, all right," Frances answered gloomily. "The only thing that worries me is whether they will take Mary Jane with them. It's only Delia's notion that they mean to leave her behind. After all, Mrs. Mortimer finds her very useful. She'll never get another servant to do so much with so little pay. Why should we count on their leaving her here?"

"Now, Kitten, don't borrow trouble!" Kathleen laughed with a confidence she was far from feeling. "Haven't we figured it all out? All that we need is a little patience. One of these fine days the Mortimers will step into their car and drive away, leaving Mary Jane to get along by herself. And we'll go right over and bring her home, and she'll be just like our own sister. Mums says that, of course, Mr. Mazaroff will arrange for her to stay with us when he goes south with Daddy—pay her expenses here, I

mean. Won't that be wonderful? All her troubles will be over, and Mr. Mazaroff's too, if your idea of 'good medicine' is the right one. There, isn't that a rosy picture? Just think of the fun we'll have taking Mary Jane shopping, and helping her pick out her very own clothes, for the first time in her life!"

"Bless you, Sis, you do see the bright side!" Frances summoned a smile. "If I could only think it would all come true! Oh, well, I suppose there's nothing to do but wait and worry. But I tell you, if something doesn't happen very soon, you needn't be surprised if my hair turns as white as Mr. Mazaroff's."

CHAPTER XIV

THE BLOW FALLS

It happened most unexpectedly that very evening.

The day had been stifflingly hot, and dusk brought a hint of thunder in the air. The Forresters were gathered on the front porch after dinner, watching the play of heat lightning far to the east. The sun had gone down in a fiery bank of clouds. The twilight air hung heavy and breathless, as though all the earth were waiting for the coming storm.

Mr. and Mrs. Forrester sat in the porch swing, Mr. Mazaroff was in his usual chair, and the girls were settled on cushions at his feet. It was one of Mr. Mazaroff's good days. He and Daddy had been discussing the power dam which they were to build in Mexico during the coming winter. As the corporation for which they were undertaking it, had stipulated that only native labor was to be employed, Daddy had observed that he must brush up on his Spanish.

"You know Spanish, don't you, Mr. Mazaroff?" Frances asked. "Daddy says you speak about all the languages there are."

"Your father is too kind, Miss Frances. It is true that I have studied Castilian Spanish, but that is somewhat different from the Latin American tongue of Mexico. I understand also that many Indian dialects are spoken in that country."

"Oh, they won't give you any trouble," Daddy assured him confidently. "You never saw anything like Boris' gift of tongues, girls. He's already studied every civilized language. And the heathen ones—well, he only has to hear them spoken, and they're his. It's a miracle to me."

Mr. Mazaroff smiled faintly. "But it is very simple, Mr. Forrester. As you say, I have studied the European languages. That was a part of my education for which I deserve no credit, since it was required of me. But for the dialects, we Russians are a diverse people, you know. In so great a country many tongues are spoken, and if we would know our countrymen we must know them all. In the Cadet School, which I attended in my boyhood, there were lads from every part of the Empire, each speaking his own. It was a matter of pride to me that I could converse with all. Perhaps that practice in childhood accounts for the facility with which I pick up languages now."

"It's a very useful talent for an engineer,"

Daddy observed. "And you'll have plenty of chance to use it among our Indian workers. Francie, look over the wall! Isn't that your friend Mortimer backing the car out of the garage?"

"Oh, it is!" Frances sat up straight. "Look, Daddy, he's bringing it around to the front door. And they haven't had it out for weeks. I wonder—oh, I do believe they're getting ready to go at last!"

All eyes were turned toward the neighboring house, and to the big car waiting in its driveway. Mr. Mortimer got out, leaving his motor running, and went into the house. Frances scarcely dared breathe as she waited for him to reappear. Was this just an evening drive to the city, such as the Mortimers had often taken during their earlier days in Medhurst? If it were, at least it might offer an opportunity to see Mary Jane, for she had never shared those drives. But if it meant something more—oh, if it only could mean the long awaited flight!

The front door opened, and Frances' heart began to pound, for Mr. Mortimer came out with two heavy suit cases. He placed these in the car, and turned back to the house. The engine chugged on impatiently.

In an ecstasy of suspense, Frances twisted

about so that she could steal a glance at Boris Mazaroff. He was leaning forward in his chair, his eyes fixed on the closed door behind which Mr. Mortimer had disappeared. His calm face showed no excitement, but Frances felt that he was waiting, even as she was, with only one thought. What would the opening door reveal?

"Looks as though they mean business," Mr. Forrester commented. "Things must have been getting too hot for him in town, and he's ready to make his getaway. I suppose they'll drive through to Detroit and cross the border there. If he's short of ready cash, that car ought to bring him a fair amount of cash when it's served its purpose. It's a new—"

"Sh, Daddy!" That was rude, she knew, but Frances simply could not help it. For the Mortimer door had opened at last.

The uncle came first, carrying another suitcase. His wife followed, with a heavy coat over her arm, and her overnight bag. Both were dressed for traveling. They hurried down the path to the car, and Frances was almost ready to breathe again when Mr. Mortimer turned about and called savagely, "Come on, you! Do you think we've got all night?"

From the depths of the house came a faint "Yes, uncle."

A small figure emerged through the door-

way, almost staggering under the weight of a heavy bag. Mary Jane, for it was she, turned to snap off the hall light, closed the door and tried it to make certain that the lock had caught. Then she scurried down the walk, as fast as her burden would allow.

"She's just putting in the bag for them, I think," Kathleen whispered, but Frances gasped.

"She's wearing her hat and coat. Oh, Kathie, I don't think I can *stand* it!"

"Wait!" Kathleen pressed her hand.

There was a delay while Mr. Mortimer arranged the luggage to his satisfaction. Then he took his place at the wheel, with Mrs. Mortimer beside him. He gave a gruff command to Mary Jane which the watchers could not catch, but the girl obediently climbed into the rear seat with the luggage. The door slammed. The car moved slowly off.

Through its rear window the girls caught one glimpse of a white, despairing face turned toward them. Kathleen waved frantically, but Frances sat very still, her head bent, and the hot tears splashing down on her clasped hands.

They had taken Mary Jane, after all. This was the end of everything. It was all over, both the hope of rescuing her and the happy schemes for her future. No need, now, to plan a day bed for her in the girls' room, to clear a third

of the closet for her use, and to decide which should be her place at table. There would be no delightful shopping trips to select checked gingham dresses and low-heeled sandals for the girl who had dreamed of them so wistfully. Mary Jane, shrinking under her aunt's harsh commands, would never even know of the new life they had planned for her.

She was gone, and they would never see her again.

A sharp crash of thunder broke the mournful silence which had fallen on the little group. No one had spoken. There was nothing to say. Mr. Mazaroff had slumped back in his chair. Mr. and Mrs. Forrester, their own disappointment very keen, were divided between pitying thoughts of Mary Jane, and an effort to find words to console their daughters. Kathleen was not crying, but her arm had stolen around her little sister's shoulder. Her eyes drearily followed the tail light of the car as it faded away in the gathering dusk.

"It's beginning to rain," Mrs. Forrester said, at last. "I think we'd better go in."

Boris Mazaroff dragged himself out of his chair, his movements those of a tired old man. "It is useless to wait here. They will not come back."

CHAPTER XV

AFTER THE STORM

ALL night the storm raged. Kathleen and Frances, lying sleepless in the bed they shared, paid little attention to crashing thunder and brilliant lightning, for their minds were fully occupied by the failure of their plan.

Their mother had been in after they had turned out the light, but even her words of gentle comfort had not helped. This was a hurt beyond her healing. It wasn't much use trying to make the best of things, when there wasn't any best. Mary Jane was gone, no one knew where. They, the only friends she had ever known, were powerless to follow or to aid.

"If only we'd done something while she was here!" Frances wept. "I wish now I'd gone to those horrible people myself, and begged them to let her come to us. They don't want her, really. Maybe if we'd told them how we'd arranged it they'd have been glad to let her go. Oh, Kathie, I shall never forgive myself. *Why* didn't we do something?"

"Honey, there was nothing we could do,"

Kathleen repeated patiently. Her own heart was sore, for in her reserved way she had loved Mary Jane, too. But all her efforts now must be turned to quieting her little sister.

Kathleen searched, in her own mind, for every comforting possibility, and even suggested that, perhaps the Mortimers would return. But in her heart she did not have much faith in this idea.

"After all, we don't know that they've gone for good," she argued. "They might just be taking a week-end motor trip. The house isn't empty, and even the draperies are still hanging at the windows. Wouldn't you feel silly if you looked out one morning and saw Mary Jane waving to you across the wall? And it may happen."

"Oh, Kathie, it's no use." Frances would not be consoled. "You know they won't come back! Of course they left the house looking as though it were occupied, to fool their creditors. I suppose there's plenty of furniture left in it, too, but that doesn't prove anything. The longer it is before people find out that they've gone, the better start they'll have. If only we could have found out the names of the people Mr. Mortimer cheated! We could have told them he was planning to run away, and they'd have sent the police. We could have— Oh, I don't know what!

But surely he could have been stopped, if we'd only tried hard enough!"

Gradually, however, Frances grew more calm, and, at last, she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

The older girl lay motionless, in an effort not to disturb her sister's slumbers, and listened to the wind and rain. It was not a pleasant night for motor travel. Poor forlorn little Mary Jane, rushing through the dark night on an unknown road. Where was she now? What future lay at the end of that road for her? Finally Kathleen, too, fell into uneasy sleep, haunted by troubled dreams.

The girls awoke to find the sunlight of a perfect summer morning streaming into the room. The storm had passed, leaving a cool, green world washed clean of dust and heat. "As if it mattered," Frances thought listlessly, as she began to dress. A pleasant day or a gloomy one—it was all the same to her now. Mary Jane was gone.

It was a depressed little circle which gathered about the breakfast table. Mr. Mazaroff looked more ill than usual and even Daddy's cheerfulness sounded forced. Kathleen's head was aching, and Frances was miserably certain that the crisp brown toast could never get past the big lump in her throat.

Mother turned troubled eyes from one to another, and was just beginning with great firmness, "Now, really, we must try to—" when there came a faint, fumbling tinkle of the front door bell.

Mr. Mazaroff, who was nearest the door, got to his feet. "I will answer it."

They heard him open the door, and waited for the voice of the early visitor. None came, but in a moment they heard Mr. Mazaroff say, in a tone of shocked pity, "Why, my dear!" And then, louder, "Mrs. Forrester! Can you come, please?"

The girls were close behind their mother as she hurried down the hall, and Daddy followed. All of them stopped short in amazement at the sight which met their eyes.

Mr. Mazaroff was bending over a little heap in the opened doorway, a heap, it seemed, which consisted mostly of soaked red satin and dripping yellow hair. Already a pool of rainwater was forming on the hall floor. As they approached, the Russian moved aside, and they saw that the eyes in the pale little face were closed.

"Mary Jane—it's Mary Jane!" Frances gasped.

With an easy sweep of his long arms, and com-

pletely ignoring his own lameness, Boris Mazaroff gathered Mary Jane into his arms. Then he headed for the divan in the living room. "Here, let me take her! She's too heavy for you, old man," Mr. Forrester exclaimed anxiously. But Mr. Mazaroff strode on as though he had not heard.

As he deposited her gently among the pillows, the long lashes swept up, and Mary Jane looked about her, pleadingly. "The doctors said I could go home," she murmured faintly. "They didn't know—they didn't know I hadn't any!"

The lids fluttered down, and the voice died away. But Frances was kneeling beside her, clasping the cold hands tightly in her warm ones. "It's all right—everything's all right now, Mary Jane. You *have* come home!"

Mrs. Forrester, her hand on the girl's wrist, spoke reassuringly. "It's only a faint, dears, her pulse is quite strong. But she's soaking wet, and as cold as ice. Can you get her upstairs, Hugh? We'll get these wet clothes off and put her to bed. No, Mr. Mazaroff, you must let Hugh help. There, that's it, take her between you. Kathleen, you come up and get your bed ready. Francie, some hot milk, darling. And bring all the hot water bottles in the house. There, my dear, you're safe now." This last remark, in a

very gentle tone, was for Mary Jane. As the two men lifted her, she had opened frightened eyes again. As they met the kind, anxious gaze of the Russian, she let her head drop back against his shoulder, with a weary little sigh.

A few minutes later, the wanderer, warm and dry and snuggled into the girls' bed, and sipped a little hot milk. Then she smiled weakly and murmured a broken "thank you"; and immediately plunged deep into the sleep of exhausted youth.

Mrs. Forrester had sternly forbidden any questioning until Mary Jane should be stronger. The explanation for her strange appearance on their doorstep could wait. And it could wait forever, as far as Francie was concerned. Mary Jane, whom she had thought never to see again, was here, sleeping like a baby in Francie's bed. Why bother about the whys and hows? It had happened—the miracle she had not even dared hope for. Mary Jane had come home!

CHAPTER XVI

HOW IT HAPPENED

IN the late afternoon, Mary Jane opened her eyes and smiled at the devoted Frances, who was reading by the bed-side.

“How did I get here?” she asked wonderingly. And then, “Oh, I remember!”

“Well, don’t tell me,” Frances warned. “The others all want to hear. I’ll call them in a minute. But oh, Mary Jane, I’ve just got to give you a big hug first. I thought I was never going to see you again! You don’t know how I felt when I saw that car drive away.”

“And you don’t know how *I* felt!” She put up her thin arms and drew her friend close. “Francie, dear, it’s so good to be back with you. I’ve been so miserable without you and Kathie, so lonely—”

“Well, that’s all over now,” Frances told her affectionately. “You aren’t going to be lonely for us again, not ever. And now I’m going down and find you something to eat. You must be starved. And then you’ll have to tell us your ad-

ventures, for I don't think the family curiosity will stand the strain much longer."

All the Forresters and Mr. Mazaroff followed Frances into the room when she returned with a tray. Mother had insisted that they were not to allow Mary Jane to talk until she had eaten something substantial, and for an invalid, she displayed a surprisingly healthy appetite. A little color had crept back to her pale cheeks, when Kathleen took the empty dishes from her, and Mary Jane assured Mrs. Forrester that now she felt quite well enough to tell her story.

"It's hard to begin, though," she faltered, glancing about the circle. Then, taking courage from their interested, sympathetic faces, she plunged into her narrative.

"We started to drive to Canada last night. My uncle and aunt had been planning the trip for days, packing and making all kinds of preparations. They sold most of the furniture, because they did not mean to come back. My uncle's business—he had a reason for wanting to go away quietly, without anybody's knowing. He wouldn't like—I can't tell you why he was going, and it's so hard to explain without—" she stammered a little, and Mrs. Forrester gave her shoulder a reassuring pat.

"We know that part, Mary Jane. About

your uncle's business, and his reasons for wanting to get away."

"You know?" the girl's great eyes widened. "And you took me in? It didn't matter to you that my uncle is a—a thief?"

"Of course it doesn't matter! It has nothing to do with you," Mrs. Forrester told her gently. "Yes, we all feel that way, every one of us. So go on, my dear."

"But you are so good, so good! I was afraid you wouldn't let me stay here, if you knew. And I knew my uncle wouldn't want me to tell. He said I was never, never to discuss his affairs with anybody. But he can't blame me if you already knew, can he?"

"Of course not," Kathleen answered, firmly. "Please go on, Mary Jane. We want to hear what happened last night."

"Well, and so we started," the girl began again. "You saw us, didn't you? Oh, I did wish I could stop just for a minute to say goodbye, but I didn't dare ask. My uncle was sure nothing was known of his—his troubles, yet, and his plan was to get safely into Canada before anyone found out."

"But couldn't you have found some way to tell us you were going, Mary Jane?" Frances interrupted. "*We* didn't dare, because of your

aunt, but surely you could have thrown a note over the wall?"

"I thought about it. But—after I knew what my uncle had done, I thought you wouldn't want to have anything more to do with me," she explained humbly. "And then, I didn't know until the last minute that they meant to take me. My uncle didn't want to, but my aunt said she had to have somebody to look after her clothes, and it would be better to have me than a strange maid who might talk too much. They quarreled about it, but my aunt had her way, as she always does."

"Delia was partly right, anyway," Frances remarked. "Go on, Mary Jane. I won't interrupt again."

"The storm broke just as we left Medhurst," Mary Jane resumed. "My uncle wanted to turn back, but my aunt said that he'd wasted too much time already. So we went on."

"We had to go through the city to get on the Detroit road, and we were on East Boulevard when my uncle crashed into a car coming from a cross street. He was driving terribly fast, and he wasn't paying any attention to the traffic lights, because my aunt was constantly urging him to hurry."

"The other driver wasn't hurt, but his car was wrecked, and he was furious. A motorcycle po-

liceman came, and a crowd gathered, the way it always does. My aunt was unconscious—she had been thrown out of the car. My uncle's face was bleeding, too. So the policeman called an ambulance and had us all taken to the City Hospital. The other man said he was going straight off to the police station to make sure that my uncle was arrested for wrecking his car."

Mary Jane paused for breath, and Frances shivered. "And you weren't hurt a bit? Oh, Mary Jane, that was luck!"

"Wasn't it? I got a few bad bruises, but that was all. The doctors said that my aunt's left leg and two of her ribs were broken, and my uncle was badly cut by the flying glass. The steering wheel broke one of his ribs, too. At the hospital, they said neither my aunt nor my uncle was dangerously hurt, but both of them will have to stay there for a while. The doctors looked me over and found that I was all right, so they told me I could go home. The house next door is locked, and I couldn't ask my uncle for the key then. But the people at the hospital didn't seem to want me around, and I didn't know what to do. So—so I came here," she ended.

"And you came to exactly the right place," Mrs. Forrester said. "But, my dear, I still don't quite understand. You say all this happened

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early last evening? Then if you came here straight from the hospital, how is it that you didn't arrive until this morning?"

"Well, you see," Mary Jane answered simply, "I walked."

"You walked? All the way from the City Hospital? And in that storm? Why, Mary Jane!"

"I had to. I hadn't any money, not even enough for a telephone call. I hadn't *any* money. I never do have, Mrs. Forrester."

"Well!" Mrs. Forrester opened her mouth to utter an indignant comment, at this new evidence of the way Mary Jane had been treated, but then she said instead, "Never mind, we won't worry about it now. You're here, and it's all over."

"Yes, and you're going to stay!" Frances said eagerly. "Oh, Mary Jane, we have the loveliest plan for you!"

She broke off as Mother shook her head warningly. Mary Jane had been through an exhausting experience. Although she seemed none the worse for it, this was not the time to risk exciting her with new plans. Frances realized instantly that her mother's decision was a wise one.

"You'll hear all about it when the time comes," she finished lamely.

Mary Jane smiled. "I can wait. Of course it will be lovely, Francie. Your plans always are."

Mrs. Forrester rose. "And now we're all going to clear out to give you a chance to get some real rest, Mary Jane. That walk! it must be a good ten miles to the City Hospital, isn't it, Hugh? Well, that, on top of the shaking up you got in the accident, is enough to keep you in bed for a day or two, young lady. And don't worry your head any more about anything, my dear," she stooped to kiss the pale forehead. "We'll take care of you."

CHAPTER XVII

MR. MAZAROFF KEEPS HIS WORD

MARY JANE was asleep again before night, and she slept, without stirring, until late the following morning. Frances shared the bed with her, and the day bed had been installed in the girls' room. Both girls wanted to be near in case she needed anything during the night. But Mary Jane did not waken when they rose early and went quietly downstairs for breakfast.

Frances came into the room at about ten o'clock, carrying a tray daintily laid with fresh peaches, cereal and cocoa.

Mary Jane was awake now, and her first words were, "I'm going to get up. Yes, thank you, I feel perfectly well, and it's ridiculous to lie here and let you wait on me. You should have called me to breakfast downstairs, Francie."

"Well, now that your breakfast is here, you may as well eat it," Frances answered calmly. "As for getting up—we'll see what Mums has to say about that."

Mrs. Forrester, hurrying in to see how the patient fared, saw no reason why Mary Jane

should not get up if she wanted to. Her bruises were not serious, and the long day and night of complete rest seemed to have quite restored her strength. "Of course you must take it easy for a day or two," the girls' mother warned. "No running and romping, mind you."

Frances smiled a little ruefully. All girls were little girls to Mother. But Francie doubted that Mary Jane had ever done any romping, even when she had been very little. However, she did not speak her thoughts, for she had no desire to remind her guest of the past.

Instead Frances turned cheerfully to the problem of finding clothes for Mary Jane. The red satin dress she had worn in the storm was streaked and bedraggled beyond hope of repair. Frances was not sorry about that dress. Nor did she regret the tattered silk stockings and the satin shoes. Angry looking blisters on Mary Jane's heels told of the needless torture they had contributed during that memorable walk. Both girls had already agreed that Mary Jane was through with Mrs. Mortimer's cast-off finery forever.

Mary Jane, though several months younger, was as tall as Kathleen. She was much thinner, but it seemed likely that Kathleen's clothing would fit her better than Frances'. So Frances brought from Kathleen's dresser some pink voile

underthings, and a summer smock of rose-colored linen.

It was pathetic to see Mary Jane's delight as she slipped into the cool, clean, simple fabrics. "All my life I've thought how wonderful it would be to wear cotton undies," she said solemnly.

Frances laughed. "And all my life I've thought how wonderful it would be to wear silk! Mother makes ours by hand, and she uses voile and dimity because Helga thinks they're easier to launder. I know what you mean, though, Mary Jane. That lace-trimmed stuff your aunt liked wouldn't appeal to me either. Oh, I love that smock on her, Sis!" she exclaimed to Kathleen who had just joined them. "That deep rose, with the big white collar is exactly right! Don't you think so?"

"Absolutely. How about shoes? Get my party slippers, Francie, the Colonial ones. Here are some stockings. Oh, they won't do, either. Gracious, Mary Jane, what a tiny foot you have. You'd be lost in these."

Frances said, "We'll have to try my shoes, Kathie. Here, Mary Jane. These sandals aren't so lovely to look at, but they ought to be about the right size. Do you mind ankle socks? They're all I ever wear in summer."

"I've always wanted them," Mary Jane an-

swered. "If you knew how I hated long chiffon stockings, how many pairs I've had to darn, you'd know how precious these are. And the nice flat sandals. Do the buckles go this way? Oh, how comfy!"

She took a few steps, smiling. "Why, walking is fun in these! If I'd only had them the other night, I'd not have been so long on the way. I—" she stopped suddenly, for her steps had brought her before the full length mirror set in the closet door. "It isn't—that can't be me!" she exclaimed wonderingly.

Frances laughed. "I, you goose. Don't you remember the old woman on the King's Highway? 'Lawk-a-mercy on me, can this be I?' It's nobody else, darling, so you might as well get used to her. Like her? I do!"

"Oh, I do!" Mary Jane breathed ecstatically. "At least— It's vain to say that, isn't it? My aunt always said that vanity is one of my worst faults. But I didn't mean—"

"Now listen to me, Mary Jane." Frances took her firmly by the arm. "Nobody in this house cares a hoot for your aunt's opinion of your faults. Will you do just one thing for me, the only thing I'll ever ask you? Promise? All right. Then just forget all about the things you had to do to please your aunt, and *be yourself*."

"Yes, she means it," Kathleen answered Mary Jane's unspoken question. "You don't have to choose your words here, honey. We like you just as you are, and we're not waiting around to pounce on some imaginary fault. That goes for the whole family, too. And now, if you're all ready, let's go downstairs. I think the Older Generation has something to say to us."

"But it's so different—everything's so different here!" Mary Jane murmured to her reflection in the mirror. She smiled a shy, little smile, and the mirrored face smiled back at her. With Frances' arm around her shoulders, she followed Kathleen to the door.

Daddy and Mr. Mazaroff were relaxing in deep chairs on the front porch when the girls found them, and, hearing the gay chatter, Mrs. Forrester came out and joined the group. "Who's going to tell Mary Jane the news?" Frances demanded, drawing her friend down beside her on the steps. "Are you, Mr. Mazaroff? Or Daddy? I wish you'd let me do it!"

"I should be very glad if you would accept the task, Miss Frances," the Russian said, and Mr. Forrester nodded.

"Oh, good!" Frances clasped her hands. "Listen, Mary Jane, listen with both your ears, for this is all about you."

"You're not going back to those horrid Mortimers ever again. You must begin right now to forget that there are such people in the world. You're going to stay here with us, and wear civilized clothes, and go to the movies sometimes, and play, and have fun! You're not going to be worked to death, and scolded, and ordered about. That's all over forever. Mr. Mazaroff is going to take care of you, just like Daddy takes care of us. It'll be like having a real Daddy of your own. There, that's the plan I wanted to tell you about yesterday. Isn't it *lovely*?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Mary Jane faltered in bewilderment, her great eyes sweeping the circle. "I'm stupid, I know. My aunt has often said so. Please—" the eyes paused at the Russian's face. "Won't *you* tell me?"

"It is as Miss Frances has said, little one," he assured her. "You have not been well treated by your relatives, and we have long felt that you should be removed from their charge. If you will accept me as your guardian, I shall do my best to see that your future is happier than your past has been."

"But my uncle, my aunt," she stammered. "They will never let me go."

"You haven't seen the morning papers, Mary Jane," Mr. Forrester put in. "Before springing

our plan on you we should have told you. Your uncle has been arrested at the hospital. No, not for reckless driving, but for embezzlement. You see, the police already had a warrant to arrest him on the embezzlement charge, and when they went to the hospital to inquire into the accident they recognized him at once. It was a bad thing for Mortimer when he hit that other driver, for it was that man's complaint which led the police to the hospital. Mortimer would have got away if he'd watched his driving."

"He—my uncle—he is in prison, then?" Mary Jane asked, in a daze.

"He's in the hospital at the county jail, and as soon as he is able to go into court he will be tried on the charge of misappropriating funds entrusted to him. From what the papers say, it's a clear case. He's pretty certain to spend the next few years of his life in the penitentiary. I hope you won't feel badly about this news, Mary Jane. We had to tell you."

"My uncle is a bad man," Mary Jane said slowly. "He cheated those poor people who trusted him with their money, and then he tried to run away. I can't make myself feel sorry that he must be punished. Once I should have tried, but only this morning Francie told me I must 'be myself.' I am *not* sorry, Mr. Forrester."

"And I'm not either," he agreed heartily. "I'm mighty glad you're too sensible to waste any sympathy on the scoundrel. Believe me, he's not worth it. Well, that's that. What I'm getting at is that Mortimer is not in any position to interfere with you. For that matter, besides being in difficulties with the law, I understand he's bankrupt. He couldn't possibly make any provision for taking care of you. Under those circumstances, some arrangement would have to be made, and I see no reason why my friend, Boris here, shouldn't be allowed to take on the job. He'll have to make formal application to the court to adopt you, but if it's satisfactory to you I think it will go through all right. How do you feel about it yourself, Mary Jane?"

"Feel about—oh, you mean about having Mr. Mazaroff for my guardian instead of my uncle? But I can't tell you—it's too wonderful to think of! Only I haven't any right to expect it. Nothing like that ever could happen to me. He—you—" she turned, distressed toward the silent Russian. "You don't know me, Mr. Mazaroff, or anything about me. I can't let you—you couldn't possibly want—*me*!"

Boris Mazaroff leaned forward, and putting a thin hand beneath her chin, he looked deep into her eyes.

"Listen, my little one," he said very gently. "Listen well. I am alone in the world as you are alone. I have known sorrow; so, I think, have you. May it not be that we two sad ones were meant to find our way into the sunshine together? I do want you, my dear. More than I thought ever to want anything again. Is it, 'Yes'?"

Mary Jane gave a deep sigh. Then quite simply she put her two hands into his. "I can't believe it—I don't deserve it, Mr. Mazaroff. But I'll try—oh, I *will* try! Of course it's 'Yes'!"

It was Frances who struck the first discordant note in the babble of congratulations and rejoicing which followed. A terrible doubt had pricked its way into her mind, and she could never conceal her worries.

"Listen, everybody! We've forgotten all about Mrs. Mortimer!" she cried. "*She* isn't in jail, she's only in the hospital for a few weeks. And she's the one who thinks up the pleasant little home duties for Mary Jane. The Canadian trip's off, so when she gets well she'll be coming back to the house next door. What do we do when she comes home and screams for Mary Jane to come and attend to the week's washing? Will someone please tell me that?"

Both Kathleen and Mary Jane turned smitten faces toward her, but Mr. Forrester did not seem perturbed.

"Boris and I have considered that," he explained. "Mrs. Mortimer will have to be dealt with before any legal steps can be taken, but we aren't worrying. I called the hospital this morning and found that it would be weeks before she can be about. She hasn't asked for Mary Jane, or shown any interest in the child's welfare, and we won't remind her. If we can show the court that Mary Jane is being cared for in a good home, and that Mazaroff is able and willing to provide for her, while the Mortimers are not able, and have shown no willingness, I don't think we'll have anything to worry about. We'll just let things slide along for a while, and let the legal end of it wait until after Mortimer's conviction. There'll be no trouble then, I'm sure."

That was enough for Frances. It was enough, too, for the others. Only in Mary Jane's eyes a shadow lingered, the shadow of an old dread, too strong to be so quickly tossed aside. As they all entered the house for luncheon, she drew her new guardian aside with a timid hand on his arm.

"You won't let her get me again, will you?" she asked fearfully.

"Indeed I will not." He drew her arm through his, and smiled down at her, but his voice was serious. "You are mine now, little one. Always remember that. No one shall take you from me while I live."

CHAPTER XVIII

HAPPY DAYS

It seemed to Frances and Kathleen that it was a genuine effort to recall the time "before we had Mary Jane."

Everyday living with their rescued protégé only deepened their affection for her. She was pure gold through and through, and sunnily unselfish always. She eagerly seized every opportunity to show her gratitude. Yet Mary Jane was not in the least "goody-goody," a quality the girls abhorred. Mary Jane had a very real sense of fun. Even though it had been painfully suppressed for many years, it was delightful to watch it unfold now. Frances often thought of the time when she had first coaxed Mary Jane to laugh aloud. How different that scared little chuckle had been from the low, delighted laughter which came so readily nowadays!

The improvement in Mary Jane's health and appearance, which began while her aunt was away, and was so suddenly checked by Mrs. Mortimer's return, now went forward at an amazing pace. Mrs. Forrester and Helga rejoiced to

see the sharp bones rapidly covering with firm flesh, but it was Frances who discovered the first dimple in Mary Jane's rounded cheeks. Kathleen insisted that the young girl's fair hair, which Mrs. Mortimer had kept closely cropped, should be worn longer. And, as it grew it displayed an unexpected tendency to twist itself into little windblown ringlets. The effect was fascinating when contrasted with the blackness of Mary Jane's long lashes, and her dark eyes. Her beauty would never be of the conventional pink-and-white type, but, in its odd way, it was unquestionably real beauty. In the sunshine of happiness the real Mary Jane was revealing herself. The whole household watched her with the cherishing delight they might have shown for some rare flower.

The sweetest thing about her, the Forresters thought, was her way with Mr. Mazaroff. The sisters had told her of their worry about his health, and also of Frances' theory that Mary Jane might be "good medicine" for him. Shyly, but with immense determination, the girl made him her special care. She would appear on the porch with a tall glass of cold milk, and coax him to drink it to the last drop.

She was quick to see when conversation tired him, but when he was well enough, she would sit

for hours on the step at his feet, and draw him into talk of books. Mary Jane had had little chance to read, but now she grasped at every opportunity to read, and to listen to others talking of books. Mr. Mazaroff seemed to enjoy molding her reading tastes, and discussing each new exciting discovery she made in literature.

He was never to know how carefully she managed it, but one day he felt the impulse to offer to stroll down to the library to help her find a book. It was the first time Mr. Mazaroff had gone to the village, and, except for his first exhausting trips to the city with Mr. Forrester, it was the first time he had left the house since his arrival.

After that it seemed quite natural for Mary Jane and her guardian to take a walk every day, but only a short one at first. The walks gradually grew longer as Mr. Mazaroff found that he tired less and less easily. This exercise, gentle as it was, soon gave an edge to his listless appetite. He slept better, too, and the dark circles under his eyes began to fade away.

This renewed interest in life was apparent in every word the Russian spoke. It was no longer difficult to make conversation with him. He amazed Mrs. Forrester one day by asking if he might use the drawing board Daddy kept at

home. She agreed readily enough, and when Mr. Forrester returned he found his assistant busily engaged upon a sketch of the Mexican dam.

"But hold on, Boris, you can't do it that way!" Daddy 'exclaimed, throwing his hat on the table and coming to look over his shoulder. "Here—and *here*—" he touched various points, "That wouldn't do. It'd never stand up. You see—" and he went on to make the necessary technical explanations. Mr. Mazaroff listened respectfully, for he professed no knowledge of American rivers and soil conditions.

"I didn't suppose it would be practical," he said candidly, when he had been convinced. "But I began thinking about the project, and I wanted to see it on paper. It helps me to understand it more clearly. And it's high time I began to concentrate on the idea. We've discussed it in general terms, but now I want to know exactly how you propose to handle it, and what my job is going to be. If I'm going to be worth my salary to you, it's time I began to work."

"Oh, you'll make up for lost time, don't worry," Mr. Forrester said. "I'll bring some stuff home from the office tomorrow. No, I'm not going to have you go into town in this heat. There are quite a lot of details I'd like to have you

work out, if you feel up to it, but they can perfectly well be done here."

He spoke casually, concealing the wonder and relief he felt. The miracle had happened. At last Boris had "come alive"! "Bless that child, she's done this!" Mr. Forrester told himself delightedly. Mary Jane had proved that Frances' theory was right, and she had shown herself to be good medicine indeed.

July passed, and most of August. The days were beautiful. The sun shone, the birds sang, and never an unpleasant incident ruffled the happy life in the Forrester household. Mary Jane blossomed into beauty, and Mr. Mazaroff gained strength daily. Mrs. Forrester went about the house smiling, and, in the kitchen, Helga lifted her quavering voice in Swedish folk-songs.

There had been a most exciting expedition to the city, to buy Mary Jane a complete new outfit. It had been hard to entice her into expressing any preferences, for she asked only to have clothes like those the other girls wore. But Kathleen and Frances had reveled in choosing for her. They selected flowery cotton prints, soft-toned linens, checked gingham, with lovely summer organdies for best. "Not silk, please," Mary Jane had pleaded, and though they laughed

at her prejudice, the girls were careful to respect it. Mrs. Mortimer's passion for rich fabrics had given Mary Jane a lasting distaste for them.

Somewhere, in the hot crowded city, Mr. J. Sterling Mortimer waited in jail to answer for his wrongdoing. Somewhere, in a hospital, Mrs. Mortimer nursed her broken bones, and vented her temper upon long-suffering nurses. No word came from either of the Mortimers, and to the Forresters they had faded like people in a dream.

Even to Mary Jane the old unhappy days had grown faraway and unreal. This was her place, here in this cheery house where she was never scolded, and where she could love and expect to be loved in return. The gloomy, tenantless house next door, where she had suffered so much, had lost its power over her.

Why, then, in the midst of perfect peace, did she shudder sometimes when that house cast its grim shadow across the garden wall? Why did a little chill steal over her heart, if she happened to glance at its frowning windows?

It was nothing to her now. She had escaped from its dark spell, and it could never claim her again. Her future was secure. Safe and smiling, it lay spread before her.

In the autumn, before leaving for Mexico, Mr. Forrester and her guardian would apply to

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the court to make her adoption legal. She would stay here with the friends she loved, happy and protected. School would begin, so different from last year. Then she had been so miserable, so sure that everyone was laughing, when she was not looking, at her wretched clothes. She had often shaken her head when the teacher had asked a question to which she really knew the answer, just because she dreaded having to stand up and recite with all eyes focussed upon her.

It would all be different now! In the pretty clothes Mr. Mazaroff had bought for her, and sponsored by Kathleen and Frances, she would go back to her classes. She could make friends among the girls and boys, and show the teachers what she could do, now that she was daring at last to "be herself." And always there would be letters to write, and something joyous to look forward to. As Kathleen and Frances would be planning eagerly for wonderful times "when Daddy comes home," she too would plan. She, too, would have someone coming home, someone dear who belonged to her.

It was a wonderful future. What could the Mortimer house do to her now? Nothing, of course.

And yet—!

CHAPTER XIX

NATALYA

ONE hot, lazy afternoon in late August, Mr. and Mrs. Forrester had gone to the city. Mary Jane and Frances had strolled down to the corner drugstore for a soda; but Kathleen had refused to join them. She said the ice cream could not possibly be worth the long walk in the blazing sun.

She and Mr. Mazaroff had decided that today the living room with its electric fan was preferable to the porch. As usual nowadays, he was busy with blue prints of the Mexican job, and he bent absorbedly over the drawing board. Kathleen was curled up in the biggest chair with an extremely dull book.

Over the top of it, she studied her companion. How he had changed in the six weeks since Mary Jane had come to them! Kathleen remembered how incredulous she and Frances had been when Daddy told them that Mr. Mazaroff was his own age, forty-two. With those tired lines in his face, and his white hair, he had seemed much older to them. But about twenty years had dropped from

his age with his recovery, Kathleen decided now.

Of course his hair was still white, but over a healthy, tanned face it did not make him look old. Instead it added an aristocratic and a distinguished touch to his appearance. Kathleen recalled little Francie's early speculations as to whether their guest might not be a prince. Dreamily she tried to picture him in the royal raiment of the characters in the illustrations of her old fairy-tale book. But modern princes wouldn't wear those clothes anyway, she decided. What would they wear? Uniforms, perhaps? Yes, that was it. A white and gold uniform, with a long sweeping cape, and a jeweled sword, and—

"I'm sorry," she started guiltily, realizing that Mr. Mazaroff had spoken to her. "I was almost asleep. It's too hot to read."

"Too hot for work, also," he smiled. "And I cannot proceed with this until I have spoken with your father. I think I shall merely be lazy for the rest of the day."

He put away his drawing board and settled himself in the chair opposite her. "Do you know where Mary Jane is?" he asked.

Kathleen smiled mischievously. "You always say that. No matter what you're doing, if you look around and find she's out of sight you want

to know where she is. This time she went to the drug store with Francie, Mr. Mazaroff."

He laughed. "I suppose I am a little like a hen with one chick. Are you making fun of me, child?"

Kathleen shook her head. "I think it's sweet. She's the same way about you, too. Mr. Mazaroff, do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Of course not, my dear. What is it?"

"When we first knew Mary Jane," Kathleen answered slowly, "she was terribly worried because she couldn't find out anything about her own family. You remember, we told you her story that day Delia came. I don't know if she ever thinks about it now, and I hope she doesn't. Well, what I wanted to ask you is this. Does it make any difference to you, this mystery about her? If the Mortimers should decide not to keep their secret any longer, and if it became known that her parents really were dreadfully wicked people—would you care? Would you not want Mary Jane then?"

"My dear child, what a thought!" Boris Mazaroff's deep voice was vibrant with emotion. "I assure you that nothing anyone could reveal to me would make the slightest difference in my feeling for my little ward. Surely you do not think so poorly of me as that?"

"No, I didn't really think so," Kathleen admitted. "But I had to be sure. Mrs. Mortimer is a spiteful woman, and it would be like her to try to make trouble when she comes home and finds that Mary Jane has gone. If there really is some old scandal that Mrs. Mortimer could use as a weapon against her, she'd do it. And if she could turn you against Mary Jane—well, we know that she likes to have Mary Jane to wait on her, and there'd be no place else for her to go, would there?"

"Please, Miss Kathleen, you are not to vex your mind with such thoughts! Whatever her parents may have done, the child herself is blameless. No one can influence me against her. Please believe that."

"All right, I will," Kathleen said gratefully. "I do wish, though, we'd succeeded in solving the mystery ourselves. Then we wouldn't have to worry about what Mrs. Mortimer might say."

"There was so little to work with, as I remember your story," he said sympathetically. "I think you told me your search for documents proved quite fruitless?"

"Yes. The only possible clue we found was the picture, and it didn't seem to help any."

"The picture? I don't think I recall—"

"Don't you remember, Mr. Mazaroff? We told

you we found a miniature, all scratched and battered. Frances was just going up to get it when Delia came, I think."

"So she was. I had quite forgotten. Have you the picture still?"

"It's upstairs in Francie's work basket. She's keeping it for Mary Jane, but we thought we wouldn't say anything about it for a while. Mary Jane is so happy, and she seems to have forgotten all her old worries. We just couldn't bear to bring them back. But would you like to see it? Maybe you could suggest something, for it doesn't tell us a thing. I'll run up and get it."

She was back in a few minutes, with the little leather case. "Here it is," she said eagerly, and put it into his hand.

The broken hinges fell back. Undismayed by her cruel scars, the Angel Lady smiled gallantly up at Basil Mazaroff.

He gave her the briefest of glances. Then he started, held it up to the light, and peered at it incredulously. Suddenly he held the miniature straight out before him, and broke into a torrent of words which had no sense nor meaning for the bewildered girl who watched him. He had forgotten her very presence, for now he was cradling the picture tenderly in his hands. He crooned to it in that strange tongue, pressing it to

his lips, while slow difficult tears rolled down his white face.

Had he gone mad? Kathleen shrank back against the chair, too frightened to speak. But suddenly he whirled around facing her and his eyes blazed into her face.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Why, Mr. Mazaroff, I told you," she quavered. "We found it in Mr. Mortimer's desk. Is it—is it someone you know?"

"It is my wife," he answered brokenly. "My little Natalya, dead on the anniversary of her wedding day. All these years—all these years. Oh, Natalya, my darling, it has been weary waiting—"

Kathleen laid a timid hand on his arm. "I am so sorry, Mr. Mazaroff," she whispered, blinking back the tears which were crowding thick behind her eyelids.

He straightened his bowed shoulders, and spoke more naturally.

"Forgive me, little one, I have frightened you. The surprise—the shock—I think I lost my head. Look at her with me, my dear. Is she not lovely? And see, I will show you something."

With infinitely tender care he slid the strip of ivory from its leather bed and turned it over.

On the yellowed back, a few words were written in faded violet ink.

“You do not read Russian, of course. It says, ‘For the birthday of Boris. From his Natalya.’ So well do I remember that day, and her gift! Tell me again, my dear, for my poor brain seems not able to take it in. How is it possible that you restore Natalya’s gift to me *here*?”

“We found it at Mary Jane’s house, Mr. Mazaroﬀ,” Kathleen repeated patiently. “We were looking through her uncle’s old desk, and this was in a tobacco pouch, stuffed behind a drawer. Did—did you give it to Mr. Mortimer?” she ventured.

He passed his hand across his eyes, as though brushing away cobwebs. “In the story you told me of the child,” he said, taking no heed of her question, “Was there not something about jewels? This uncle—he was selling a treasure of some sort, in her childhood memory? Will you not tell me that story again, Miss Kathleen?”

Kathleen complied, going carefully into every detail Mary Jane had given them of the visit of the Man with the Beard. Faithfully she repeated the conversation over the crib, the visitor’s offer to place the baby in an orphanage, and the uncle’s refusal because his wife had had a fancy to be served “by one of that family.”

Mr. Mazaroff made her repeat this part several times. He was still questioning her, and she was doing her best to recall Mary Jane's report word for word, when Frances came running into the room.

But it was a very woebegone Frances. Her cheeks were streaked with tears, her face was working convulsively, and her breath came in sobbing gasps. She ran straight to Mr. Mazaroff and tugged at his hand, though she could scarcely speak.

"Come—quick!" she choked out. "She—she's *got* her!"

CHAPTER XX

THE DRAGON RETURNS

KATHLEEN took her sister by the shoulders. "Stop it!" she commanded firmly. "Frances, do you hear me? Stop crying this minute, and tell us what is the matter."

The younger girl was shaking uncontrollably, and her teeth chattered. But at her sister's insistence she pulled herself together and gasped out her story.

She and Mary Jane had been sauntering home, laughing and talking. Just before they reached the Mortimer gate Frances had noticed that a taxicab drove off, leaving a woman standing on the sidewalk. Frances didn't look at the woman except casually, and she didn't think that Mary Jane was even conscious of her presence. But just as the two girls were about to pass her, she turned. Her hand shot out and caught Mary Jane by the shoulder. It was Mrs. Mortimer.

"Oh, it was horrible!" Frances sobbed. "She didn't say a word, but her eyes were just blazing! She opened the gate and marched Mary Jane in. And she—Mary Jane, I mean—tried to tell her

that she was living with us now, and Mrs. Mortimer slapped her right across the mouth! Ugh, I didn't know people could be like that! I went in too—she was just *dragging* Mary Jane. I followed right along, clear up to the front steps, trying to tell her too. And when she got to the door, she opened it and shoved Mary Jane into the hall. Then she turned around and pushed me—no, it wasn't a blow, it was just a hard push—but I fell down the steps and cut my knee. And then she slammed the door! Oh, Kathie, it was terrible! And I couldn't do anything, so I ran to get Mr. Mazaroff. You won't let them keep her, will you? Won't you please, please go and make her give Mary Jane back?"

"I will go." There was a grim note in Boris Mazaroff's voice, a dangerous glint in his eyes. Very deliberately he put on his coat, dropping the little leather case into his pocket.

"No, you will not come with me, please. It is better that I go alone. Have no fear. I will bring her back to you."

He strode to the door and disappeared.

"Oh, Sis, we should have gone," Frances exclaimed fearfully. "There's no telling what that awful woman will say to him."

"No, nor what he will say to that awful woman," Kathleen answered soberly. "Did you

see his eyes? I don't think I'd care to be in Mrs. Mortimer's shoes right now. Oh, why did she have to come back, just when everything was going so beautifully?"

Footsteps on the front porch just then sent them running to the door. But it was only Daddy and Mother, returning from their afternoon in town. The girls fell upon them excitedly, eager to recount the unexpected calamity.

"Come in the living room and sit down," Mr. Forrester suggested. "And try to talk one at a time, if you expect me to make head or tail of it. Now, Kathleen, you tell us. What's all this excitement about?"

As calmly as she could, Kathleen related the story of Mary Jane's encounter, and of Mr. Mazaroﬀ's determination to rescue her.

"He can make Mrs. Mortimer give her up, can't he, Daddy?" Francie demanded before he had time to comment. "She won't have to go back to that horrible woman for good? oh, Daddy, say she won't!"

"I hope not." Daddy wrinkled his brows. "But the woman is her aunt. It's a bad situation. Boris should have made his application before this, I'm afraid. But we wanted to wait till after the uncle's conviction, if possible, to strengthen our case. I can't understand it! We were keep-

ing in touch with the hospital, and they said nothing about discharging her today. Did she seem ill when you saw her, Frances?"

"Ill! If you'd seen the grip she had on poor Mary Jane—and the push she gave me! Oh, I don't see why they ever let her go. Why couldn't they put her in jail with her husband, and keep her there? I just know she told him to steal. He wouldn't have dared do it without her permission, anyway. He's as frightened of her as—as I am. And that's a lot," Frances ended honestly.

"Mr. Mazaroff isn't frightened of her," Kathleen commented. "And whether it's legal or not, I know he's going to bring Mary Jane back with him. He said so. He was furious with the Mortimers anyway, about the picture— Oh, I haven't told you! I was so excited about Mary Jane that everything else went completely out of my head."

"Well, don't get excited again," Mother said soothingly. "What is it, dear, about a picture?"

"It was the miniature we found in Mary Jane's attic. You remember, Mums, Francie showed you? We called her the Angel Lady. Well, Mr. Mazaroff had never seen it, and this afternoon we were talking about the mystery of Mary Jane's parents, and I got it to show to him. And

Mums—Daddy! He recognized it right away. It was his *wife!*”

“Kathleen, are you romancing?” Daddy asked suspiciously. “You mean it resembled his wife, don’t you? Though that’s startling enough news. I didn’t know that Boris had ever been married.”

“I mean it *was* his wife, Daddy, really and truly. He showed me where she had written in Russian on the back of the picture, ‘For the birthday of Boris, from his Natalya.’ That was her name, and now she is dead. He told me so. Oh, I felt so sorry for him! I never saw a grown man cry before. Then he began to ask me about the Mortimers, and especially about that night the Man with the Beard came[”], and the jewels, and what Mr. Mortimer had said. Then you rushed in, Francie, and drove it all out of my mind.”

“But I can’t believe it!” Mr. Forrester exclaimed. “How in the world could a Russian lady’s portrait turn up here? Where would ordinary Americans like the Mortimers have gotten it?”

“Are you quite sure they are Americans, Hugh?” Mrs. Forrester asked. “Now that I think of it, there’s a foreign look about them, although I believe they speak English perfectly. But that doesn’t mean anything, for so does

Mr. Mazaroff. And that name, 'J. Sterling Mortimer,' has always sounded a little theatrical to me. Don't immigrants with unpronounceable names often take new ones in this country? Besides, since he was in business here, he may have thought that an American name would inspire more confidence."

"Yes, that's happened often enough," Daddy admitted. "You think, then, that the Mortimers are Russian emigrants? That they stole the picture from Boris and brought it to this country? It could happen, I suppose. But here's another question. If the aunt and uncle aren't Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer, then who is Mary Jane Smith?"

"That's a made-up name too, I know it!" Frances cried. "And the very ugliest American name they could find. Auntie would make sure of that. Oh, Kathie, aren't you glad? I never thought Mary Jane Smith was the right name for her!"

"I never thought so, either," Kathleen agreed. "I don't think it's an ugly name, though. It would be quite quaint and pretty for some girls. But it just didn't fit her, any more than her aunt's shoes did. She—oh, look! There she *is*!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE PRINCESS TANYA

EVERY head turned toward the window. From the house next door an odd little procession was issuing.

In front, walked a curiously changed Mrs. Mortimer. Her bold black eyes were cast down, her shoulders drooped, and her feet seemed to leave the ground unwillingly. „ In spite of her fashionable clothes, she was no longer the grand lady who had sneered so disdainfully at her Medhurst neighbors.

Behind her came Mr. Mazaroff with Mary Jane. She had both hands clasped on his arm, and was talking excitedly.

As they reached the foot of the steps the woman faltered, and the Russian spoke sharply to her. With a submissive nod, she turned her shuffling feet toward the Forrester gate.

Frances flew to open the door. And Mrs. Mortimer stepped meekly aside as Mary Jane drew Mr. Mazaroff into the room. Her eyes were shining, and her face was transfigured.

"Girls—Mrs. Forrester—Mr. Forrester!" she cried breathlessly. "*This is my father!*"

He led her forward a step, and bent his white head in a courtly bow to the amazed family.

"And I, my good friends, I have the great honor to present to you the Princess Tanya Mazaroff—my daughter!"

While Mr. and Mrs. Forrester wrung Mr. Mazaroff's hand in a babel of questions and congratulations, the former Mary Jane, with an arm around each girl's neck, was crying a little from pure happiness. "I have a father too, a real one, just like you! Isn't it wonderful? The one thing I wanted most in the world!"

"But he *is* a prince, then—he really is!" Frances breathed. "Oh, I knew it, I knew it from the start, didn't I, Sis? And you—you're a princess, Mary Jane. Or do I have to call you Your Highness?"

"You call me Tanya, of course, my own name. Isn't it sweet? I never felt like Mary Jane, somehow. My mother's name was Natalya, Francie, that's lovely too. And what do you think—she was the Angel Lady! And she *was* an angel, really. My father says so!"

"Yes, we know about her, poor darling. But do tell us," Frances persisted. "Does it feel any different to be a princess?"

"Of course it feels different! All the difference in the world between being somebody, with a real father, and being—just nobody. The title part isn't anything. My father was so excited that he forgot that there aren't any princesses in Russia now. So I'm not one, you know, except to him. But to know that I'm *his* daughter—why, that's enough to make me feel royal for the rest of my life!"

"Well, if we can calm ourselves for a moment," Mr. Forrester suggested now, "suppose we sit down and you tell us how this all came about, Boris. I must admit that I'm pretty much at sea. Things have moved much too fast for me in the last hour or two."

"Yes, let's do that," Mother agreed. "Oh, won't you have a chair, Mrs. Mortimer?"

The woman had been standing silently, with bent head, just inside the door, unobserved and forgotten in the hubbub. At Mrs. Forrester's words she took an uncertain step forward, and looked apprehensively toward Boris Mazaroff. He stopped her with a gesture.

"She will remain where she is, Mrs. Forrester. It is not fitting that such as she should sit in the presence of her betters. I shall have finished with her shortly, and then she may go."

He turned his back upon her and sank to the

divan, drawing his daughter down beside him.

"There are so many things to be explained, my dear friends, that I must ask your patience if my story proves a long one."

"Oh, we don't mind that!" Frances exclaimed. "Tell us every bit of it. Don't leave out a word!"

"Once before you asked for my story, Miss Francie." He smiled at the way she had squeezed herself into the corner next to Tanya. "I told you then it was a grim, unhappy one, not meant for young ears. I little knew, then, in what happy circumstances I should at last be telling it to you."

CHAPTER XXII

THE MYSTERY IS SOLVED

"THE Mazaroffs are an old family of the south of Russia," he began slowly. "Ours was a powerful family once, and one which played no inglorious part in the history of my unhappy Russia. In later years, by some strange twist of fate, few male children had been born into the family. I was the last of the line, when I succeeded to the title and estates, upon the death of my father. Until today, I believed that the Mazaroff name would die with me."

"May I interrupt, just once?" Frances asked. "I do want to get this straight. I always thought that a prince was a king's son. Was your father a king?"

Mr. Mazaroff smiled. "That was not the case in Russia, Miss Francie. The children of our Emperor were grand dukes and duchesses. 'Prince' was a title indicating nobility, similar to that of 'duke' or 'earl' in England. Although my family was older than the reigning house, we were not royal. And as, of course, you know, all titles have been abolished since the Revolution."

Frances caught an impatient glance from her sister. "Thanks," she said hurriedly. "And please go on."

"At the outbreak of the World War," he resumed, "I was betrothed to a lovely young lady, the daughter of a neighboring land-owner. We Mazaroffs have ever been a race of soldiers, and I held a commission in the Imperial Guard. Since the Japanese War, however, Russia had been at peace with the world, and my betrothed and I looked forward to a long and peaceful life in the country. Neither of us cared for court life, and we planned to make our home in the castle on the Don where I was born.

"The outbreak of the War disrupted all our plans. I was summoned to my regiment, and our wedding was postponed. It was seven long years before I saw my beloved again."

"Seven years?" Mr. Forrester interrupted. "But the War didn't last—excuse me, Boris. Go on."

"The World War lasted only four years, you were going to say? For the Russians, my friend, the Great War was only a preliminary. Torn by internal strife, we concluded peace treaties with the Central Powers long before our Allies. And only then did we begin to know the real horror of war. Civil war is the bitterest of all.

You will perhaps recall that we had two Revolutions? First there was the Kerensky Revolution, when my Imperial Master the Tsar was forced to abdicate. Later came the Bolshevik Revolution which overthrew the Kerensky Provisional Government." He hesitated a moment.

"Russian politics and Russian history of the past two decades, are most involved subjects, my dear friends. I am trying to tell you only my personal story. It is enough that I allied myself with General Denikin's Volunteer Army, which was striving desperately to stem the tide of each Revolution in turn. A hopeless task, as we know now, but it seemed then that there was a chance. We made our first stand in the north, but were gradually forced down, and down, toward the Black Sea.

"Here, for a brief time, we found peace. Our enemies, wearied, pursued us no farther. In the Ukraine a liberal republic had been set up, modeled upon your own American one. Its leaders, bitterly opposed to the Bolsheviks, welcomed us kindly, and we rested after our weary campaign.

"But it was only an interlude, for the old general, fierce in his determination to restore the monarchy, could not rest upon his arms for long. During that breathing spell, however, I obtained

a leave of absence and hurried to my old home, and to the sweetheart I had not seen all those weary years."

"And she was waiting for you?" Frances asked.

"She was waiting, Miss Frances. Simply, hurriedly, with none of the pomp in which the Mazaroffs were wont to claim their brides, we were married.

"Ten golden days we had in my old castle, a honeymoon as brief as it was beautiful. Only one unpleasant incident marred it.

"My wife, the Princess Natalya, had brought with her from her old home a personal maid, a girl called Minka. This girl's family had a bad reputation in the countryside, and she, herself, had been discharged by Natalya's mother for insolence and thievery. She had pleaded with my wife for another chance, and, Natalya, too tender hearted to believe ill of anyone, consented to take her into her service.

"Before the girl had been in the castle a day, she was making trouble. The other servants complained that she was lazy and overbearing. Small articles began to disappear from our private apartments. Minka, when questioned, swore that she had seen them taken by my old housekeeper, whom I would have trusted with the

crown jewels. The end came when the Princess caught Minka, as she was slipping a bottle of French perfume into her blouse.

"She dismissed the girl, and ordered her to leave the castle. Minka replied most impudently, and my wife summoned a groom and had him remove her. Minka went, muttering vengeance. I never saw her again, until today. You!" he turned suddenly to Mrs. Mortimer, who started violently. "Tell them who you are!"

"Yes, master." She spoke through chattering teeth. "I am Minka. But oh, master, please—"

"Silence! I will tell you when I wish you to speak." He turned his back on her again.

"Ten golden days, and the honeymoon ended. My general was on the march again. He was a great man, Mr. Forrester. Papa Denikin, his men called him, and not one but would have died for him. It was his last campaign, fought with scanty ammunition, ill-clad men, against an overwhelming force. His great heart broke, and he gave up his life when, after many weary months, we were finally forced to lay down our arms.

His head drooped for a moment. A tear for the memory of the well loved commander stood in his eye.

"Sick and disheartened, I made my way

home," he resumed. There I found fresh misfortune awaiting me. My little wife, never strong, and harassed by loneliness and fears for my safety, had succumbed to pneumonia. In my arms they placed her baby daughter, of whose very existence I had not known until that moment.

"Other news there was, which I was too distracted, too sunk in my own sorrows, to heed. The feeble Ukrainian Republic was tottering. The red fires of revolution were beginning to blaze, even in this almost isolated little river valley where hitherto they had not penetrated. The day came when I was warned that my own peasants, men whose fathers had served mine for generations, were infected with the germ of revolt and were threatening the castle.

"In the same hour came a messenger with dispatches from the north. Baron Wrangel was rallying the remnants of Denikin's army. There was promise of support by the Poles, and all hope was not yet dead. But every loyal sword was needed now. I must come at once.

"In my dire need I turned to a servant for aid. Serge Mikhaivitch was my steward, and he had administered my estate while I was at the war. I knew him to be cunning and cowardly, but I believed him faithful.

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“There was little choice, and no time for planning. I summoned Serge to me and entrusted to him my baby daughter, charging him to take her to his house and keep her safe. As a peasant’s child, I thought she would be unmolested, whereas the inflamed Reds would have little mercy upon the child of an aristocrat.

“Serge swore to fulfill my trust. He told me that his wife would be as a mother to the child. I knew that he had recently married, but fearing I would not approve, he had not told me that his wife was the woman Minka. Only today did I learn that fact.

“I confided to Serge, also, the Mazaroff jewels for safekeeping. Among them, though it wrenched my heart to part with it, was the gem-studded miniature of Natalya which she had given me before our marriage. I was going into certain danger, and I felt that, should evil befall me, the child at least would be safe, and would be assured of subsistence through the sale of the jewels. Serge swore to me by all the saints that he would guard the infant and the treasure with his life.

“I hurried to join my comrades. For a brief while fortune favored us, but I can see now that there was never any real chance of success. Word came to me in a few weeks that my castle had

been destroyed, torn stone from stone. My granaries had been looted, and my land was parcelled out among the peasants. I asked the messenger—he was Serge's brother, the village ne'er-do-well—for news of Serge. With every appearance of sorrow he told me that he, his wife and his child had been killed, and his house had been burned to the ground. I have assurance that Minka and Serge inspired that lie, that they might keep the jewels for themselves.

"I had no means of making further inquiries. With a number of my comrades, I was captured by the Soviet army, and sent to the salt mines of Siberia. From there I managed to escape, and I made my way overland down into China. That ends the story as it affects me. The rest you know."

He paused to take breath. The telling of this old unhappy story had shaken him, and Kathleen's quiet eyes noticed how Tanya's hand tightened on his.

Mr. Forrester cleared his throat. "Pretty tough, old man. This Serge—he was Mortimer, I take it?"

Mr. Mazaroff nodded. "Whether he ever meant to be loyal to his trust I cannot tell. The woman Minka says he did, that it was she who

tempted him. I do not know. One can place no reliance on the word of such cattle.

"These, however, are the facts. They made their way out of Russia with the child and the gems, and came to New York. There they disposed of the Mazaroff jewels, one by one, to a Russian pawnbroker of Bolshevist sympathies. He found it most amusing to assist in despoiling the hated aristocrats. He was the Man with the Beard Tanya remembers. With the money the jewels brought him, Serge engaged in business. In his unscrupulous way he is shrewd enough, for he found it possible to cheat your countrymen as he had cheated me.

"That, I think, concludes the story, my friends. Minka, with her insane spite against my dead wife, insisted on keeping the child and forcing her to wait upon her hand and foot. You may speak, Minka. This story, where it concerns Serge and yourself, is as you told it to me in the house next door. That is true?"

"It is true, master." She spoke with cringing humility, in direct contrast to the strident tones in which she had always issued her orders to "Mary Jane."

"A few more questions, Minka, and you may leave this house which your presence pollutes. You deliberately degraded my daughter, dress-

ing her in your cast-off clothing and forcing her to perform the most menial tasks. You did this for the pleasure of knowing yourself served by a Mazaroff, whose shoes you are not fit to clean. That is true?"

"Oh, no—Highness, I beg of you to have mercy! I did not mean—"

"Answer me!"

"I—I— Yes, Highness. It is true."

"You did more." He had risen from his seat, and was towering over the shaking woman. "You dared—you, a common, lying, thieving peasant—you dared to claim my daughter as of your blood. It is true that I ordered Serge to say the child was his if it were necessary to save her life in the stress of Revolution. But here, in free America, where no harm menaced her, you dared to tell the world that Tanya Mazaroff was *your* niece! That is true?"

"Oh, master, forgive, forgive! I— Yes. It is true."

"And yet more. Because the Princess Natalya, a saint if ever one walked this earth, justly discharged you for a common thief, you dared blacken her memory to her daughter. You dared to take her name upon your unworthy tongue and to say that she—she—was a wicked woman. Answer! Did you or did you not do that?"

"I—yes, master. I—heaven help me! I did that."

"Knowing that you lied?"

"Knowing that I lied, master."

With the last words the woman made a sudden rush across the room, and fell upon her knees at Tanya's feet.

"Oh, forgive, forgive!" she sobbed. "I have done wrong, little mistress—ask the master to have pity upon me! See, on my knees I beg it! I will serve you day and night, I will make amends, I will—"

Her English failed her, and she trailed off into Russian, a storm of sobs and frenzied pleading. Frances, who had thought never to pity "Mrs. Mortimer," was sorry for her now. She was relieved when Boris Mazaroff interrupted the torrent with a few sharp words in Russian.

"Enough!" he added, as Minka struggled to her feet and stood sniffing before him.

"Mr. Forrester," he went on calmly, "may I trouble you to take down a statement in writing, that this creature may sign and depart? Her presence here offends me."

"Certainly." Mr. Forrester took out his fountain pen.

Rapidly Mr. Mazaroff dictated a confession covering the theft of the jewels, the truth about

Tanya's parentage, and the relinquishment of all claims upon the child.

The pen was thrust into Minka's trembling hand, and, when she had signed, Mr. and Mrs. Forrester added their names as witnesses.

"And now," Mr. Mazaroff motioned toward the door, "you may go. You asked for mercy, and you have it. I am allowing you to go! When you visit your husband in the jail you may tell him of this interview. Tell him that a Mazaroff does not war with women, and that I have graciously allowed you to depart in peace. But tell him, also, that it is well for him that he is safe in a guarded cell! Tell him that you are leaving Medhurst at once, never to set foot in it again. You understand, do you not, that neither you nor Serge is ever to approach my daughter upon any pretext. Never, so long as your miserable bodies hold breath? You understand that?"

"I understand, master," the woman faltered. It was plain that she had not expected to escape so lightly from the prince's wrath. In her heavy face, relief struggled with terror. As though she feared he might repent, at his first word she had begun to shamble toward the door, her face turned backward over her shoulder as if fearing a command to halt.

“Then go!”

The words cracked like a whip, or like the knout which would have been her portion in the days of old Russia.

Without a word, fumbling blindly for the knob, she opened the door and scuttled through it.

CHAPTER XXIII

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

It was one week later.

Tanya, as the sisters had quickly learned to call her, had gone into the city with Mr. Mazaroﬀ. They had heard of an artist who was especially skilled in miniature work, and Mr. Mazaroﬀ was anxious to have the scarred portrait of the Princess Natalya restored for his daughter.

Tanya was never tired of questioning her father about this lovely mother, whom she had never seen. For her sake he searched his memory, bringing out recollections he had tried to stifle because of their bitterness. But he discovered now that, shared with Natalya's daughter, they were strangely sweet. He described for her the gray old castle in which he had lived, and the ride through the gloomy forest which led to Natalya's home. He told her of the young princess's first ball, of how her dainty beauty had held all eyes, of how he, and many another young noble there, had sworn that night to win her. Scores of rivals he had had, but he had out-

distanced them all, and had won the coveted prize for his very own.

He told Tanya, too, of how the village folk worshipped her mother, with her never-failing charity and sweetness. She had gone among them from early childhood, bringing relief when poverty and illness spread their dark wings. She had cheered the saddest hearts and lightened the heaviest burdens.

In all her brief, bright life, Natalya had made but one enemy. This was the sullen, treacherous girl, Minka. Her own mother had warned her against the servant, but the gentle little princess could not believe that anyone could be so hopelessly bad. It was through her trusting kindness of heart that Minka had been given the second chance she so basely betrayed.

Tanya could never get enough of these details. She had smarted so long under her "aunt's" taunts, had suffered so keenly from the tales of her parents' "wickedness," that it was heavenly sweet to know the truth at last. How far from wicked her father was she could see for herself, and his stories of her mother made her happiness complete.

Upon this particular afternoon Kathleen and Frances had returned to their old seats in the shadow of the Mortimer wall. It was the same

spot in which they had sat and wondered about their young neighbor, but that seemed so long ago now!

Frances was silent, musing about this fairy tale from real life which had so amazingly fallen into their humdrum days.

"Do you think, Sis," she asked suddenly, "that Mr. Mazaroff suspected anything? About Tanya being really his daughter all the time?"

"No, of course not. I know what you mean though. It was odd, the way he and Tanya seemed drawn to each other from the start. But I'm sure that was only instinct, for he couldn't have known. Remember he had been told positively that his baby was dead. Of course, he may have felt more kindly toward her because his own daughter would have been just that age, but that's all."

"There's no resemblance, either to him or to the Angel Lady," Frances said. "She's more like his own mother, he thinks now, but the likeness isn't strong enough for him to have noticed it before he knew. You'd think he might have recognized the Mortimers, though, living right next door."

"Oh, he didn't see them. Don't you remember how little notice he took of anyone, in those days? He hardly seemed to see *us*. Just a pass-

ing glimpse of strange neighbors wouldn't have meant anything to him. He believed Serge and Minka were dead, and I suppose they'd changed a great deal, too. Tanya told me that he didn't recognize the woman when he went over there that day. It was she who gave herself away when she saw the thunder in his face."

Frances giggled. "And *she* never knew she was living right next door to the man they'd robbed! I'd like to have been present at that interview. Tanya never has told me what happened. Do you know?"

"Not very much. Just that the woman called him 'master,' and began to stammer excuses and apologies. And 'my father' questioned her sternly, and 'my father' ordered her to come over and tell her story to us. Did you ever notice how often Tanya seizes the chance to say 'my father'? They're precious words to her now, poor child."

"Poor child!" Frances repeated. "How can you say that? A mighty lucky child, it seems to me, and a princess at that. Kathie, I've just remembered something! Do you recall what I told you the Carter boy called Tanya on the day she lost her slipper at school? *Do you?*"

"No, I don't think. Oh, yes, I do. Cinderella, wasn't it?" Kathleen smiled. "I see what you

mean, dear. She really was a Cinderella, ashes and all, wasn't she? And the prince came and rescued her, just as the story says."

"Yes, only *we're* not in the original story," Frances pointed out. "And we really did the rescuing, or at least, we found her for the prince. Let's take all the credit that's coming to us."

"Cinderella, with modern improvements. Yes, I think we can pat ourselves on the backs, Kitten. We really were some use, for once in our lives. It is like a fairy tale, isn't it, the whole story? It's the sort of thing that doesn't happen in real life, only it did."

"And it happened right in our own neighborhood—that's what makes it so marvelous! Anything might happen in the newspapers, but this happened *here!* To us! I can't get over it. Sis," Francie went on, "do you think Tanya minds not getting to be a real princess? I mean, living in a castle and having servants and jewels and all that? I'd be just furious with those old revolutionists if I were in her place."

"I'm sure she never gives it a thought. Now that she has her beloved father, I don't believe she'd change places with a reigning queen."

"No, I suppose not," Frances agreed. "Oh, look, here she comes with her father now. And who in the world have they got with them?"

They were not long in doubt, for as the little party crossed the lawn they recognized, behind smiling Tanya and Boris, the beaming face of the former Mortimer cook.

"Girls, it's Delia!" Tanya called out. "We met her on the street in the city, and she doesn't like her new place a bit. And my father thinks we might make room for her here, because now that I've come to stay it makes extra work for Helga. Of course my father will pay Delia's wages. *Do* you think it will be all right with your mother, Kathleen? I'd love to have Delia with me. She was so good to me, over there."

"I wouldn't want to be puttin' the other cook-lady out," Delia interposed anxiously. "But if you could take me, Miss Kathleen, it's happy I'd be. Many's the time I used to look over the wall and think what a grand place this would be and all, with the young ladies so gay, and not above chattin' with the cook like she was a human bein'. Do you think they's a chanst for me, Miss?"

"I don't see why not," Kathleen answered. "Helga'd be glad of some help, I know that. I'll speak to Mother right away, Delia. I think it'll be all right."

"This is only a temporary arrangement, you know," Boris Mazaroff interrupted. "Eventually Tanya and I will have to think about a

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home of our own. And when that time comes, we both feel that Delia is the proper person to take charge of it."

"A home of your own?" Frances started. "Oh, Mr. Mazaroff, you aren't planning to take Tanya away from us?"

"Not far away, my dear, and not just yet. Until she is a little older, I am delighted to know that my daughter is safe in your good mother's care. But some day, when my work lies closer to home, I should like to buy a little house here in Medhurst and settle down. You would not mind having us for neighbors, Miss Frances?"

"Oh, I didn't know you meant that!" Frances exclaimed. "I thought—I was afraid you meant that you wanted to take her back to Russia. And I couldn't stand that, I just couldn't!"

"I shall never return to Russia, my dear," Boris Mazaroff smiled with a hint of the old sadness. "There is no place in there for me now, nor for my daughter. And it is as well," he added more cheerfully. "I was bitter at first, but I know now that my comrades and I were fighting for a lost cause. The old regime served its purpose. It is as well that it should give way to a newer one. My views are not those of the men who rule Russia today, nor can I approve

of the methods by which they attained power. But those are problems which the Russian people must work out. It is not the place of a poor exile to attempt to solve them. There are men of good will there, as in all places. It is my faith that eventually they will work out a happier means of life for my former countrymen. As for me, I am an American now, and my daughter shall grow up as an American girl. Believe me, I do not regret it."

"I should think Tanya would regret it, though," Frances remarked. "Anyone can be an American girl, but she would have been a princess."

"Oh, Francie!" Tanya exclaimed. "I *told* you that doesn't matter! Can't you believe me?"

"What's all this about princesses?" Delia put in. "I can't make head nor tail of it."

Frances stared at her. "Do you mean they didn't tell you?"

"Why, Mary Jane told me her grand news, Miss Frances, that she's not Mary Jane at all, but some Rooshian name I can't lay me tongue to. And that the gentleman here is her own father, and that them Mortimers was crooks, which well enough I know it. But she said naught of princesses."

"Well, she *is* a princess, Delia," Frances said

solemnly. "Yes, our own Mary Jane. No fooling. Now what do you think of that?"

"Glory be!" Old Delia stood slightly apart, and surveyed the smiling Tanya from head to foot. "Well," she concluded at last, "Princess or no, she looks just the same to me."

"And I am the same, Delia," Tanya answered quickly. "I could never be any different to you. Why, if you hadn't fallen from the step ladder that day I'd never have known *who* I was! I shouldn't have known my father, or the Forresters, or *anything*, if it hadn't been for that lucky tumble of yours. Just remind me of that, if ever I begin putting on any princess airs with you, Delia."

"Well, you've fair got me head in a whirl," the Irishwoman confessed. "But no doubt I'll get the straight of it in time. And don't I see the lady of the house lookin' out of the window? If you'd just speak a word for me, Miss Kathleen—"

Kathleen hopped up at once and led Delia into the house. But Tanya, Frances and Mr. Mazaroﬀ lingered in the shadow of the wall,

Father and daughter had brought back some news from the city which Tanya was anxious to tell her friend. They had visited the state's attorney, whose duty it would be to prosecute

"Mr. Mortimer" when he came to trial. The man had confessed his guilt, so that the official was able to tell them he would probably receive a prison sentence of at least ten years. "Mrs. Mortimer" had disappeared. She had not even waited to learn her unfortunate husband's fate. Whether from fear of the law, or of Mr. Mazaroff, she had left no traces behind her.

"But she can't do anything to you if she ever does come back, can she, Tanya?" Frances asked.

"Not a thing," Mr. Mazaroff answered positively. "I showed Mr. Horner the confession which Minka signed, and he says it will be a simple formality to obtain a court order declaring Tanya my daughter, and awarding custody of her to me. So that's all cleared up. We'll never see Minka again. I shouldn't wonder if she had returned to Russia. Well, the Soviet Union is welcome to her!"

"She should have been punished, I think," Frances observed. "It doesn't seem right that she should go free, after all she did to you, Tanya."

"Oh, what does it matter!" Tanya laughed. "I don't want to punish her. All in the world I want to do is forget her. Let's talk about something else. Do you really think you and Mr.

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Forrester will *fly* to Mexico, father? That will be exciting!"

As they sat, animatedly discussing the Mexican trip, a moving van drew up in front of the empty house next door. The "For Rent" sign had come down yesterday, the girls remembered.

Just behind the van came a shabby small car, crammed full, it seemed, with boys and girls. A huge police dog perched on the running board. and the first child to bounce to the ground cuddled a tiny Maltese kitten. A jolly, roly-poly mother shepherded the little flock into the house, while the father stopped to joke with the moving-men.

Frances watched the arrival, smiling. "So those are the new neighbors. I don't think we'll have to rescue any Cinderella from *that* family!"

Tanya smiled too. The Mortimer house was no longer a place of dread, a dark shadow stretching across her sun lit path. The spell was broken, and never again need she fear that ordinary, rather ugly house. She was free!

Clear and sweet across the lawn came the clang of the dinner-gong.

Tanya rose, and slipped one arm into her father's, and the other around Francie's waist.

Slowly, happily, clasped on either side by

one who loved her dearly, the little princess moved toward the open door. Never had the Princess Natalya, her mother, paced toward her stately dining hall with more grace, nor with a lighter heart. Tanya had no castle, no jewels, no retinue of servants. She had her white-haired father, and Frances, and a handful of faithful friends within the plain small house. She was well content.

And so she lived happily ever after!

The End

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